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Mothering into the new millennium: how mothering affects women's lives

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Mothering into the new millennium: How mothering affects women's lives

by

Amy Michelle Popillion

**A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

Major: Human Development and Family Studies

Major Professor: Sedahlia Jasper Crase

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

2000

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**Graduate College
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**This is to certify that the Doctoral dissertation of
Amy Michelle Popillion
has met the dissertation requirements of Iowa State University**

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For the Major Program

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For the Graduate College

This dissertation is dedicated to:

**My husband and best friend, Jason Popillion
“Because you loved me”**

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ABSTRACT

Focusing directly on information gained from mothers' perspectives, this study examines how mothering affects women's lives. Twenty-seven mothers participated in four focus groups and of these women nine participated in individual interviews. The women were all Caucasian, married, middle-class, and had at least one child under age 5. The following nine themes emerged from the data: 1) "maternal" sacrifice, 2) bearing the emotional labor of caring for children, 3) pressures/expectations of mothering, 4) mothers' connections to their children, 5) mother/father differences in parenting and the influence of the marital relationship, 6) issues of loss surrounding motherhood, 7) use of strong language, 8) value of mothering, and 9) ways this research will benefit others. This research makes an important contribution to our understanding of women's lives by allowing mothers' voices to be heard; from this research we can begin to understand what types of resources and support will best assist women in their mothering roles. In order to increase the transferability of the findings, future research needs to focus on exploring similar issues with diverse groups of mothers.

INTRODUCTION

In describing how she perceives her connection to her children, one mother in this study said this:

[Here she is talking in comparison to her perception of her husband's connection] I ache emotionally for them more. I ache and yearn for pregnancy and he doesn't. I can see my children across a room and feel apart from them. When they are asleep or away from me, I can close my eyes and imagine the smell of their skin and the feel of their cheek. (FG1)

This connection between mother and child existing as a private, intimate relationship is treated as anything but private and intimate in the public sphere. Valerie Polakow (1993) in her book Lives on the Edge chronicles the early history of motherhood and defines the family as a "social construct which...has undergone dramatic historical shifts" (p. 22). She contends that while families have "never been a stable structure, an unchanging essence" (p. 22), the myths of the stable, ideal family have endured. Along with these myths of the ideal family come images of the ideal mother. Polakow writes, "the construct of mother love as biological, instinctive, or innate has served to legitimate particular conceptions of womanhood and motherhood as subordinate" (p. 38). These social constructions of motherhood also serve to silence women in sharing their experiences, as often the gap between what they expect from their mothering experiences are in fact quite different from the daily realities of mothering (Maushart, 1999).

The literature offers a wide array of approaches to motherhood, some focused specifically on understanding the transition to motherhood (Bergum, 1989; Mercer, 1995; Ruble, Brooks-Gunn, & Fleming, 1990); some on understanding the more technical aspects of this transition such as division of labor among spouses, changes in financial status, and marital disruption (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Sanchez & Thomson, 1997); some considering how the choices mothers make, such as working outside the home, impact children's development (DeMeiss, Hock, & McBride, 1989; Goldberg, Greenberger, & Nagel, 1996; Scarr, 1998; Tolman, Diekmann & McCartney, 1989); while other research focuses on motherhood at different stages of the child-rearing cycle, such as mothers of

infants or empty-nest mothers (Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, & O'Rand, 1998; Hooker, Fiese, & Jenkins, 1996). There is also an abundance of research focusing on the ideology of motherhood and how this ideology affects mothering beliefs and practices (Adams, 1995; Hays, 1996; McMahon, 1995).

This research study examines how mothering affects women's lives focusing directly on information gained from mothers' perspectives. It is based on a naturalistic paradigm. Creswell (1994) describes the qualitative or naturalistic paradigm as "an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants and conducted in a natural setting" (pp. 1-2). According to Creswell, "the qualitative researcher needs to...rely on voice and interpretations of informants" (p. 6.).

Part of the tradition of anthropological work has been the level of involvement the researcher has with the people in the group he/she is studying. Tierney (1993) writes, "Researchers need to become more fully engaged with those whom we wish to interview" (p. 131). He claims that over reliance on traditional research goals has led researchers to "deny voice to those individuals involved in our research" (p. 131). Focusing on allowing individual voices to be heard is part of the phenomenological research tradition as well. Seidman (1998) in describing the phenomenological approach writes, "I am interested in other people's stories...stories are a way of knowing" (p. 1). I, too, believe that in recording the stories of people's lives we gain a unique insight into the human experience, in this case the experience of being a mother.¹ This understanding transcends "scientific" facts into the more humanistic realm. In writing about debunking the mask of silence surrounding the realities of motherhood, Susan Maushart (1999) writes

What human beings need to know about mothering is perhaps the greatest story never written. The journey to motherhood is an odyssey of epic proportions, and every woman who undertakes it a hero. Celebrating our role at the very core of humanity means learning to sing every line of that epic freely, the lamentations along with the hymns. When the masks of motherhood do crack through, they will have been eroded by tears that have been shed and

¹ In qualitative research, the researcher plays an active role in the data collection process, thus becoming part of the research. For this reason, first person dialogue will be used throughout this dissertation.

shared, by the tremor of secrets unclasped, by the booming laughter of relief. What lies beneath the brave and brittle face of motherhood is a countenance of infinite expressiveness, a body of deepest knowing. (pp. 246-247)

This study seeks to examine this level of “deepest knowing” and to assist women in sharing their experiences of motherhood so that others might benefit from their knowledge. To best inform the reader of the existing literature in this area, the following literature review will first focus on the historical context of motherhood, followed by an overview of some of the various ideologies of motherhood, along with a section on the “work” involved with caring for children, and finally a section focusing on the how gender and the marital relationship influence parenting. Because the sample for this study consists of married, Caucasian, middle-class mothers, the following literature review focuses primarily on studies related to this homogeneous population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historical context

With the onset of industrialization in the early 19th century, we began to see the work and home spheres shift from a unified “production” team to separate entities. With these changes came a sharper division of roles between the husband as the breadwinner and the mother as keeper of the home and family. Shapiro, Diamond, and Greenberg (1995) point to two major social revolutions that served to move fathers to the outskirts of parenting. They cite first the movement of births from home to the hospital as one major change that diminished the influence of the father. Secondly, they cite the industrial revolution as another major change that served to further separate the father from the family. Thus, most of the domestic responsibilities and child rearing responsibilities were left to the mother, whereas in the past they had been more shared. In earlier agrarian communities, not only was there more shared responsibility for “survival” between the mother and father but also within whole communities. After the industrial revolution, as people began to move to more urban areas, there was also a loss of this broader sense of extended community support.

Polakow (1993) takes her reader from the wet-nursing practices of the Bourgeois women of 18th and 19th century France to the patriarchal based families of the Puritan era in North America to the idealized images of the nuclear family prevalent in the 20th century. Polakow describes the prevalent discourse of the mid-19th century woman as “desexualized, uninterested in intellectual pursuits, imbued with piety, and devoted to home and hearth” (p. 30). Motherhood was defined as a natural pathway for women, a pathway of self-sacrifice and full responsibility for children’s outcomes. Silverstein (1991) in her discussion on the debate about childcare and maternal employment writes that it was during the late 19th century when we saw the “transformation of parenthood into motherhood” (p. 1026). However, Susan Chira (1998) points out that many of the practices of mothers from past periods of history would be defined as “bad mothers” according to today’s standards, such as sending very young children off to apprenticeships and having wet nurses

for young infants. Even though outside work did not separate women from the home, because of other domestic responsibilities, mothers still did not have time to give children undivided attention. Historically, it was the fathers who provided the moral and intellectual stimulation to children. Mothers were considered too sinful or lacked the intellectual knowledge to provide more than physical needs to children. Not until after the age of industrialization did mothers begin to be “given” more responsibility over more or all aspects of child rearing.

What followed during the early 20th century was a strong interest in the “science of child-rearing.” This view emerged with the mother as the primary agent of a child’s development (Polakow, 1993). According to theorists such as Sigmund Freud, the relationship of the mother to her child was of utmost significance in determining developmental outcomes for the child. It was also during the early 20th century that the notion of exclusive mother care came into fashion. Lamb (1995) writes

Psychoanalysis has significantly shaped Western conceptions of parenting and child development. In almost every psychoanalytic and psychological formulation of development, it is taken as a given that the mother is the first primary attachment figure for the child in early life. Fathers hardly exist, except to offer support to their wives. (p. 45)

Also prevalent within this discourse is the mother being blamed and held responsible for problems in emotional growth or pathological behavior of her children. This belief has promulgated all types of “expert” advice directed toward mothers.

Jacquelyn Litt (1997) writes of the “medicalization of motherhood” which occurred as the movement from reliance on mothers’ experience and knowledge was shifted to reliance on physicians’ advice and guidelines. Litt discusses how these practices served to divide mothers based on class and ethnicity. During the early 20th century the notion of “well baby care” came into fashion. This was also the beginning of the trend to rely on doctors’ wisdom concerning such matters as infant feeding, growth and development, and even guidelines for proper guidance and discipline. Currently, while there are several other avenues to obtain parent education, a vast majority of parents rely on physicians’ advice concerning child development issues.

After the Great Depression and World War II, John Bowlby's theory of attachment attracted much attention. This along with the surge of childcare manuals such as Dr. Spock's The Pocket Book of Baby and Child Care (1946) served to further the emergence of this "professionalization" of motherhood, thus adding to the already heavy responsibilities and burdens for child outcomes being placed solely on the mother. According to Spock, full-time devoted mothers were necessary to shape healthy and well-adjusted children and even for the betterment of society at large.

Other organizations have also held powerful places in the historical context of motherhood. The La Leche League formed in the 1950s in the Chicago area was another promoter of exclusive mother care and, as did other movements of the time, served to continue the weight of responsibility being placed on the mother. Blum (1999) writes of this organization:

The organization incorporated ideas from the reform and psychoanalytic communities: natural childbirth, early bonding, exclusive and prolonged mother-child attachment through breastfeeding, and a child-centered family that respects each child's developmental timetable, were best for the health and well-being of mother, child, and the larger social body. (pp. 37-38)

Of course by this time, around the 1950s, the idea of the ideal nuclear family with the ever famous "Leave it to Beaver" mother was in full swing. Miller, Moen, and Dempster-McClain (1991) write, "The 1950s was a period in the United States that especially encouraged the exclusive investment of women in motherhood" (p. 565). These authors looked at how involvement in activities outside of marriage and mothering influenced women's self-esteem, life satisfaction, and perceptions of mothering. They looked at the number of roles a woman takes on, defined as social integrations, and the women's subjective assessments of their mothering roles.

Using a secondary data source obtained during 1956, Miller et al. (1991) analyzed general life satisfaction, self-esteem, number of roles, and feelings of maternal inadequacy, maternal detachment, and maternal discontent, along with five demographic control variables. Outside roles frequently included club member, contact with neighbors, friends, relatives, and attending religious services. Only about 18% of women in their study worked outside the home. Obvious class

differences were related to outside activities. For example, lower class women were less likely to be club members and more likely to be paid workers. As might be expected, mothers with more social roles reported higher levels of self-esteem and life satisfaction than those with fewer roles. This was not predicted by one role in particular but rather as a combination of roles. Also as might be expected, social class was a predictor of life satisfaction with higher social class predicting higher life satisfaction. In relation to paid work, the role of a paid worker was related to higher levels of maternal discontent and maternal inadequacy. This was likely a result of the prevalent ideology of the time of women as full-time housewives and mothers.

It is important to note that the stereotype of women as full-time housewives and mothers was one divided both by race and class. After the 1960s and especially into the 1970s, feminist writings were beginning to become influential in highlighting the discrepancies between stereotypes and more factual representations of everyday mothers. Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan (1994) in their book Representations of Motherhood write

In the 1970s, feminist theory directed considerable attention to dismantling the ideology of motherhood by understanding its patriarchal roots and by underscoring that it did not represent the experiences of mothers themselves. (p. 3)

Miller, et al. (1991) add that researchers in the 1960s and 1970s were concerned with women's exclusive involvement in motherhood related to maternal isolation, low prestige, low level of skill, lack of structure of full-time motherhood, and sole reliance on home and family as sources of self-satisfaction. These authors pointed out that "failure or dissatisfaction in this primary role leaves no alternative source of gratification" (p. 566).

While many hold fast to the cultural stereotypes of the 1950s "Leave it to Beaver" mother, the current shift has been toward the 1980s "Supermom" image – the mother who can "bring home the bacon" by working a stressful 40 or more hours per week, continue to be the center of her children's world, manage to organize an efficient household, while still finding time to participate in school, civic, and professional organizations, and of course still find time for exercise and personal

fulfillment. Hochschild (1989) chronicled this new lifestyle of modern mothers in her book The Second Shift. One can pick up almost any newsstand magazine and find an article about how today's busy moms "manage" their lives.

Beginning after the 1950s but really becoming more apparent in the 1980s, women were entering the workforce at a rapid pace. According to data presented by Susan Chira (1998), after 1950 the percentage of married women in the workforce increased by about 10% per year. Spencer (1984) cites various reasons for this trend such as higher divorce rates, average widowhood at age 56 meaning the need to provide for oneself, the economic standards of modern life, and seeing work as a source of self-fulfillment. However, she writes "leaving their families and returning to the work force has been a source of guilt for most women because this behavior goes against traditional roles" (p. 7). Also, Chira points out that while in the 1950s staying home was not only about caring for children but also about devotion to the domestic responsibilities and support to her husband, "by the 1990s, the term *housewife* had virtually vanished to be replaced by *full-time mother*" (p. 18).

Spencer (1984) discusses this institutionalization of mothering as requiring of mothers full-time care of children and full responsibility for them. She talks about the obstacles young girls face in developing a sense of independent selves because of the cultural stereotypes of the ideal woman/mother. She points out that in a historical context exclusive mother-care is not the norm outside of the western world. Spencer looks at the isolation of mothers perpetuated by the nuclear family and the individualistic philosophy prevalent in western culture which leaves the home as the safe haven from the outside world; she writes, "consequently it became the woman's job to provide this" which she says in turn led to the idealization of the mother "defined as loving, gentle, tender, self-sacrificing, devoted, and having interests limited to creating a haven for their families" (p. 17). Because of these "standards" women are constantly measuring themselves based on conformance to the culturally accepted model. Nonconformance most often creates guilt and self-admonishment as well as insecurity in the mothering role. Spencer makes an important point when she writes, "Being in

the primary position in the lives of their children is not going to be given up lightly by women – and certainly not until they have something as sure and as fulfilling in the outside world” (p. 65). Heading into the new millennium, it is unclear whether we have moved beyond these deeply ingrained ideologies, as the reader will likely find evident in the words of the women of this study.

Ideologies of motherhood

Because women often base their perception of motherhood on the group to which they belong, it is important to consider what cultural, societal, and familial messages women are receiving about what it means to be a mother (DeMeiss & Perkins, 1996). Sharon Hays (1996) in her book The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood analyzes “mothering as a historically constructed ideology” (p. x). She discusses the concept of “intensive mothering” within the prevalent cultural model, which tells us that, “children are innocent and priceless, that their rearing should be carried out primarily by individual mothers and that it should be centered on children’s needs, with methods that are informed by experts, labor-intensive, and costly” (p. 21).

Hays (1996) points out that while this is not the only model available for contemporary parents, many women continue to ascribe to this ideology despite changes in other aspects of their lives which make living up to this standard sometimes impossible and quite guilt-inducing. In her book, Hays describes one of her respondents as “a successful professional woman with a demanding, well-paying job, a marriage she considers egalitarian, and a two-year-old daughter” (p. 1). The mother continues to subscribe to the notion of, what Hays terms, intensive mothering through her commitment to being the central caregiver for her child, her belief that a mother should sacrifice herself for her child, and rating her satisfaction derived from parenting superior to her satisfaction derived from work.

Hays’s project (1996) consisted of analysis of historical views about child rearing, a textual analysis of contemporary child-rearing books, and in-depth interviews with 38 mothers of 2- to 4-year-old children. The women for her interviews were recruited from San Diego, California using a

modified snowball-sampling technique. To prevent bias among groups of mothers closely acquainted she used no more than three mothers from each initial source. She spent from two to four hours talking with each woman, covering topics such as their reasons for having children, basic child-rearing routines, discipline techniques, where they get child-rearing advice, ideas about child-rearing, their parents' ideas about child-rearing, attitudes toward mothers working outside of home vs. staying home full time, attitudes about day care, as well as some general questions. In addition to an in-depth interview, these women filled out a 13-page questionnaire covering basic demographic and family history questions and questions regarding their ideas about children, child-rearing, and daily child-rearing activities.

Overall, Hays (1996) discusses the previous separation of public and private spheres as opposed to the more current merging of public/private spheres and how this has impacted the ideology of motherhood. She points out the various contradictions between the ideology of intensive mothering versus the ideology of the western marketplace that emphasizes a more individualistic nature. When considering why the ideology of intensive mothering has not changed to be more in line with the current individualistic ideologies, Hays (1996) considers various explanations, such as (a) the need for intensive mothering is actually based on the intense reality of children's needs; (b) some have ignored the fact that the ideology of intensive mothering is actually disappearing as women seek to maximize self-gain; (c) intensive mothering can be seen as an indication of the power of men, whites, upper classes, capitalists, and the state; or (d) the ideology of intensive mothering actually exists as opposition to the ideology of the rationalized, calculating marketplace. Related to this fourth argument, Hays points out various ways it is exemplified, such as through mothers' portrayals of the inherent "goodness" of children, the need for a mother to put others' needs first without selfishness, and the importance of relationships above materialistic accomplishments, as well as mothers' portrayals of how "mothering can help to make the world a better place" (p. 170).

Hays (1996) writes that the above four arguments are not mutually exclusive and coexist in tension. While she does see how mothers seek to maximize their own personal gains through mothering and how mothering serves the interests of those in power, she also points out that mothers operate within a logic that opposes the logic of self-gain. She writes

If women were simply calculating 'rational actors' operating according to the logic that dominates in the marketplace, they could easily dispense with the ideology of intensive motherhood. And if they did so, there would be no cultural contradictions and motherhood would not hold the symbolic power that it does in our culture. (p. 173)

Overall, Hays claims that the more the public sphere becomes "impersonal, competitive, and individualistic," the more intense child rearing will become, and the family, especially the mother, will remain the symbolic connection to human ties. Thus, she sees the ideology of intensive mothering as one facet of connection to maintain separation of public/private spheres.

Other researchers have focused on understanding women's perspectives of what it means to be a mother, a "good" mother specifically. Brown, Lumley, Small, and Astbury (1994) in their book Missing Voices: The Experience of Motherhood ask women the question, "How would you describe a 'good' mother?" (p. 139). Their research is based on results from questionnaires and in-depth interviews with Australian women during 1989. A total of 790 women who had given birth during a specific 1-week period completed a questionnaire. A follow-up study 12-18 months after the original study yielded 90 in-depth home interviews, 45 with women who had scored within the depressed range from the earlier study and another 45 with women of similar background who did not score within the depressed range originally. These authors found that women in both groups were overly critical of their own mothering abilities and expected themselves to be what one mother termed "a faery goddess and a machine" (p. 160). This mother describes a good mother as one who "always knows what to do, and does it well, without complaining, without yelling, without manipulating anyone. A good mother uses her power to protect her children from all harm. A good mother has healthy, happy, wonderful children" (p. 160). Brown et al. write, "To be [this mother] is more than is

asked of any human being in any other role in life, yet it is expected of women in their relationships with young children” (p. 160).

Other studies illuminate women’s experiences as mothers, such as Kaplan’s (1992) study of a homogeneous group of 12 upper-class mothers of toddlers. In her study, all of the women were Caucasian, married, college-educated, and living in New York. All of the women were first time mothers, not pregnant with a second child. Six were mothers of boys and six were mothers of girls. Kaplan was interested in “how to make meaning of motherhood” (p. 3). She used a case study approach with a mix of structured interviews followed by a second meeting with participants using standardized measures and a semi-structured interview format. Her findings suggested that the women in the study “did not present themselves in terms of the kind of close connection to their mothers and other women that theory would expect” (p. 203). Kaplan concluded that because of these mothers’ social positions, they did not identify with the groups of parents who are focused on the lack of social supports for families; rather they reinforced maternal isolation, believing that a mother is “to take care of herself as well as her child with no help from spouses, friends, or social institutions” (p. 205). While Kaplan acknowledges the difficulties in generalizing her findings, she suggests that further research would build on her study; she writes, “It is also hoped that questions of mothers’ own images of motherhood will be considered worthy of further attention” (p. 205).

Bergum (1989) who followed six women, all first-time mothers comparable on age, background, and financial status, from mid-pregnancy to a number of months following the child’s birth suggests that in order to “come to a deeper understanding of women’s transformative experiences of being mothers” (p. 15) her study should be extended by using an approach similar to hers, but conducted with other types of mothers. Bergum focused on various stages of the experience of motherhood. These areas included the decision to have a baby, the period of pregnancy, the childbirth experience, becoming responsible for a dependent being, and then “living with a child on one’s mind.” Her primary research question was “How does a woman come to understand herself as a

mother?" and overall. "What is the nature of the transformation of woman to mother?" (p. 7). She considered not only the physical, cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of becoming and being a mother but also the spiritual aspects of this experience. Through the dialogue of several mothers' stories, she highlights various themes that emerged and explores the broader issues these themes seem to signify. She offers several examples, which show how outsiders such as doctors and other childbirth experts undermine the mother's control and responsibility tied with the birth experience.

She writes

The responsibility of becoming a mother belongs to women. All procedures, techniques, and interventions, to the woman or child, need to consider and support the acceptance of responsibility on the part of the mother. (p. 156)

Related to mothers' knowledge and responsibility, Sara Ruddick (1989) emphasizes the discourse that develops through mothers' thinking. She contends that mothers develop a "maternal" way of thinking through their daily experiences in caring for their children. She writes

Daily, mothers think out strategies of protection, nurturance, and training. Frequently conflicts between strategies or between fundamental demands provoke mothers to think about the meaning and relative weight of preservation, growth, and acceptability. In quieter moments, mothers reflect on their practice as a whole...maternal thinking is no rarity. Maternal work itself demands that mothers think; out of this need for thoughtfulness, a distinctive discipline emerges. (p. 24)

Ruddick defines a practice as a specific form of reasoning with concepts defined by shared aims and rules, having shared language and actions, and writes, "[It is] within a practice that thinkers judge which questions are sensible, which answers are appropriate to them, and which criteria distinguish between better and worse answers" (p. 16). She also writes, "To be a 'mother' is to take upon oneself the responsibility of childcare, making its work a regular and substantial part of one's working life" (p. 17). Being a mother, or maternal work, she contends constitutes a specialized discipline characterized by a specialized way of thinking. According to Ruddick, three primary demands constitute maternal work – the preservation of children's lives through meeting their basic needs, fostering their growth and development, and following socially acceptable guidelines defined by

primary social groups within mothers' lives. Mothers meet these demands through preservative love, nurturance, and training. To accomplish all of these "requirements" of mothering, mothers develop a specific way of thinking.

Ruddick (1989) believes that maternal criticisms should be left to those who participate in maternal practice meaning mothers themselves. She writes, "Mothers have been a powerless group whose thinking, when it has been acknowledged at all, has most often been recognized by people interested in interpreting and controlling rather than in listening" (p. 26). She believes that we lack a language through which to talk about mothering. She writes, "Overwhelmed with greeting card sentiment, we have no realistic language in which to capture the ordinary/extraordinary pleasures and pains of maternal work" (p. 29). She criticizes the ideology of motherhood that defines mothering as oppressive to women because of its consuming nature requiring sacrifices of self, which is unnecessary for adequate development of children. While she acknowledges there are sacrifices related to maternal work, she writes, "To suggest that mothers, by virtue of their mothering, are principally victims is an egregiously inaccurate account of many women's experience and is itself oppressive to mothers" (p. 29). Many mothers experience a deep love of mothering along with a strong feeling of maternal competence and are rewarded through several aspects of maternal work, such as feelings of camaraderie with other mothers, gratitude and pride of grandparents, closeness developed with their mate, as well as satisfaction experienced by having control over more details of their work than workers in other "fields" typically have.

Finally, Ruddick (1989) looks at societal stereotypes of good mother/bad mother and power held by mothers. She discusses how from a child's perspective mothers hold intense power; however mothers themselves sometimes feel relatively powerless and are frequently undermined by experts such as teachers, doctors, or other "child" experts. She points out in part due to technological advances in our society, pregnancy and labor submit women to others' control.

McMahon (1995) in her book Engendering Motherhood describes the experiences of motherhood among 59 Canadian mothers, all full-time working mothers, some middle class and some working class. The majority of women in her study were married or with partners, although some were single parents. The educational backgrounds of these women varied from ninth grade to Master's degree. McMahon originally set out to study the relationship between the meaning of work and motherhood in women's lives; however, the final study became more about the experiences of motherhood in these women's lives. Chapters and headings in her book included, "Motives for motherhood," "Motherhood as moral transformation," "Love: The expression or the achievement of female identity," "Maternal identity as character," and "Women's everyday lives as mothers." Overall, McMahon found that while "being a mother was central to participants' sense of self...it was not exhaustive of social identity" (p. 273). She found that becoming a mother often allowed the women in her study to achieve the female identity, and she concluded "through motherhood women judge their worth not just as women but as persons" (p. 274).

McMahon (1995) points out that because of several social changes women spend less time throughout their lives in a mothering role. These changes include marrying later; having children later, outside of marriage; choosing not to have children at all; more women participating in the career world; and increased life expectancies. Spending less time in the mothering role causes women to look at more alternative paths to identity development than in the past.

Forty-five percent of the middle-class women interviewed in McMahon's (1995) study indicated that they had always wanted children and found it difficult to give specific reasons for this desire. McMahon believes that this "represents a particular kind of identity claim" (p. 53). McMahon considers how living in societies where having children is culturally normative, that giving reasons for wanting children seems antithetical. McMahon considers ways that our cultural ideologies of mothering in turn reproduce the existing social structures. According to McMahon, motherhood is based within heterosexual female gender identity. She writes that not only is motherhood an

expression of gender, it also is a means of producing gender evidenced as many women in her study described how motherhood had transformed them. McMahon writes, "Indeed, it appeared that it was having children that allowed women to claim or realize this phenomenological sense of real self in ways that reaffirmed certainly cultural ideals of womanhood" (p. 158).

McMahon (1995) asks the following questions: (a) What is it about motherhood that has the cultural power to so symbolize moral transformation in a woman's life; (b) What are the cultural meanings of children, such that they seem to be so central to the production of gender through motherhood; (c) In what ways do children function as cultural resources in reconstituting, as 'morally enhanced' persons, women who become mothers; and (d) How, if at all, is the production of gender and moral character through the cultural resources of motherhood and children connected to the reproduction of classed and raced gender identities? (p. 158). Her overall thesis is that motherhood is an intertwined process as it both expresses and produces gender and thus impacts women's identity development in various ways.

The "work" of caregiving

Another area important to address is the reluctance of many people to classify the work of caring for children as actual "work." Teghtsoonian (1997) discusses this resistance to classify caring for children as "work," in her article, "The work of caring for children: Contradictory themes in American child care policy debates." She writes

This resistance is rooted, in part, in an assumption that 'real work' requires effort, is motivated by pragmatic considerations, and is paid, whereas women's caregiving emerges more or less spontaneously from women's 'nature,' is motivated by emotional attachment, and is understood to create its own rewards. (p. 79)

Teghtsoonian looks at policy areas such as childcare, maternity/paternity leave, social welfare reform, and compensation for those who care for children. She argues that women

pay a high price in terms of personal health, safety, economic autonomy, and well-being for the absence of policies that reflect an acceptance of, and willingness to provide material support for women in a variety of roles and family structures. (p. 79)

She points to the discrepancies between beliefs that middle-class mothers should stay home and provide full-time care for their children while lower-class mothers should seek paid employment to stay off welfare. She says these beliefs imply that parenting by lower-class mothers is not as valuable as that of married, middle-class mothers and thus expresses a general lack of value for women's work of caring for children. Another important point she makes specifically in reference to low wages of childcare providers also holds true for mothers as well. She writes that childcare providers continue to be paid low wages "despite frequent references to the work of caring for children as 'the most important job' anyone can do" (p. 82). Several people tout mothering as one of the "most important jobs," however, support provided to mothers is often very low. This likely affects the emotional well being of mothers and thus illustrates the need to look at the emotion "work" involved in caring for children.

In the gerontological research, especially the research focused on how caring for people with Alzheimer's affects caregivers emotional well being, there seems to be some correlation with the emotional work involved with caring for young children. Previous gerontological research has identified caregiving as stressful and focused on caregiver burden; however, according to MacRae (1998), "one important oversight is that the emotional dynamics of caregiving are not well understood" (p. 138). Her article focuses on informal caregiving to elderly family members who have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease and the emotion work that is required of their caregivers. MacRae found that the caregivers in her study expressed a wide range of emotions ranging from anger, frustration, sadness, guilt, and love. She writes, "talk about emotions and the continual struggle to control them permeated the interview conversations of almost all of the caregivers who took part in this study" (p. 142). One important aspect of the emotional dimension that arose from her research was that "not only must caregivers frequently manage their own emotions but they must at the same time deal with the care recipient's inability to control his or her emotions" (p. 143). For example, MacRae found that caregivers often tried to use the coping strategy of blaming the disease rather than

the patient. While at times this served to diminish the anger or frustration, at other times it served to make them feel more guilty because they were not able to manage their own emotions even with the knowledge they had of their loved one's condition. MacRae writes regarding times when a caregiver is not able to successfully manage his/her emotions, "One of the potential costs associated with emotion work is that failure in managing feelings can have a negative impact on the individual's sense of self" (p. 145). Because women are typically more likely to be in formal caring roles, both paid and unpaid, this sense of self is more likely to become problematic for women.

Evans (1991) discussing the feminization of poverty writes, "Women's poverty reflects their biographies as caregivers" (p. 169). This statement reflects the fact that those in caregiving positions are typically underpaid. Ferguson (1991) describes the low wages paid to child-care workers, especially family home daycare providers who make sometimes as low as \$2.26 per hour. Ferguson explores the realities of caregiving for preschool children. She discusses that caregiving is often invisible and underpaid, thus insinuating a low value attached to caregiving and that it is often not even recognized as an occupation. Ferguson points out the emotional consequences of doing "invisible" work, one of these consequences being "the undervaluing of an important part of [one's] life" (p. 84). Caregivers often receive contradictory messages such as children need full-time care and it is a noble activity, yet experience a lack of acknowledgement for their work. Ferguson advocates for more recognition of both the physical and affective dimensions of caregiving, working to integrate men into primary care-taking roles to shift the gender imbalance, building on strengths of childcare arrangements already established by women, and sharing of responsibility for childcare by families and state thus involving greater integration of public and private spheres.

Looking further at the concept of caregiving as "invisible" work, Baines, Evans, and Neysmith (1991) write that "caring refers to the mental, emotional, and physical effort involved in looking after, responding to, and supporting others," (p. 11) and because this work is usually done by women in families, professions, and usually done for dependents (i.e., children, elderly, or disabled),

this work is largely invisible and thus not included in cultural and societal definitions of labor. They write, "because caring is provided in the context of a supposedly freely entered relationship and regarded as 'natural' for women, the labour involved is often rendered invisible" (p. 14).

Daniels (1987) also writes of the "invisible" work that women do. She discusses that the notion of work as something set apart from the rest of life is a fairly new concept. She notes that this is not so in all societies, as in other cultures there is much more integration of broader aspects of life including work, spirituality, and family life. Daniels points out that in Western culture work tends to be thought of as hard, an arduous task, something that has to be done, something requiring training and experience, and something set apart from leisure. In this culture, the essential aspect of work tends to be that one gets paid to do it. Daniels shows how our concept of work is affected by the above definitions, precisely through the separation of public and private spheres, the importance of financial compensation, and the gender differences inherent through these definitions. Daniels writes further regarding Western society's societal concept of work:

Work provides a clue to a person's worth in society – how others judge and regard him or her. To work – and earn money – is also to gain status as an adult. Thus, working is an important way to develop both a sense of identity and a sense of self-esteem. (p. 404)

Within a historical context, men left home to do the "real" work while women stayed behind to maintain the home front and create a respite for the man who comes home from the "real" job of providing for the family. Women's work was likely seen as unimportant, tedious, monotonous, and requiring little thought, thus women's work became invisible.

Perhaps most significant regarding caregiving and the invisible nature of women's work is the effect this has on one's identity and sense of self. Skaff and Pearlin (1992) research the effects of caring for a family member with Alzheimer's disease related to role engulfment and the loss of self. They write, "We expect that the constriction of normal activities resulting from caregiving may be mirrored in the loss or shrinkage of self" (p. 656). Several of the participants in their study had given up their occupations to care for a family member, saw a decrease in social activities because of no

time or others not being comfortable around the patient, and often sacrificed their hopes and plans to the realities of caring for a person with Alzheimer's disease. Skaff and Pearlin hypothesized that the more limited the outside contacts and fewer major roles other than caregiving, the more exclusively one would be immersed in caregiving, thus in turn making them more vulnerable to self loss.

Regarding the role engulfment experienced by caregivers as this occurs, they write, "the caregiver is correspondingly left with fewer outside sources of self-evaluation, which intensifies the salience and impact of the experiences within the caregiver role" (p. 65 7). They measured self-loss (how much one has lost a sense of who he/she is and how much has one lost an important part of his/herself based on relative's illness); caregiver competence (evaluation of their own adequacy in the caregiving role); self-gain (personal growth experienced in the caregiver role); self-esteem (using Rosenberg's Self-Esteem scale); and depression. They also considered other factors that might contribute to role loss such as income, education, gender, age, and relationship to patient.

Skaff and Pearlin (1992) found that spouses as caregivers were more likely to experience role loss than adult children caring for parents; women were more likely than men to report loss of self; younger caregivers experienced more self-loss; and the more dependent the patient the more role engulfment and thus more loss of self. Contact with friends appeared to serve as a protective function against self-loss and the more "identities" one had the more potential sources of positive self-evaluation. An interesting finding was that self-loss and self-gain were independent. One would expect them to be at opposite ends of the spectrum; however, caregivers frequently experienced both self-loss and self-gain. While the findings from Skaff and Pearlin's research offer some insight into understanding several aspects of caregiving related to mothering, it is important to point out that Skaff and Pearlin's research is focused on caring for patients with Alzheimer's disease, which in and of itself is different than caring for young children. While there is a sense of finality in caring for Alzheimer's patients, caring for young children is done so within a context of development and growth.

It is important to recognize that the link between caring work and that it is primarily done by women, serves to create a gendered structure. DeVault (1991) examines the cultural definitions and perceptions of work, specifically related to caring work typically performed by women. Using data from interviews with women and some of the men in thirty families, she examines the following questions: (a) What actually happens in our homes and daily lives; (b) Who cares for us; (c) How do class and gender work together to structure our society and its tasks; and (d) Why do women accept a role, a place, in our social organization that is inequitable? In her research, DeVault focuses specifically on the feeding practices of families such as who prepares, buys, serves, and plans the meal times for the family, thus the title of her book, Feeding the Family.

DeVault (1991) writes about the contradictions of our current definitions of work and caring, specifically related to beliefs that there is a biological basis for caring based on women's inborn characteristics and beliefs that work done outside of the context of paid employment is not considered actual work which is further perpetuated by the ideology of separation of public/private spheres. She writes, "It is increasingly clear that a full acknowledgment of women's contribution to social life will require moving beyond this wage-based mode of thought and rethinking definitions of work" (p. 238). She points out that housework involves interpersonal relations along with physical work, but this "work is often unnoticed and unacknowledged" (p. 228).

Overall, DeVault (1991) writes about how women monitor and organize the shaping of the "family." She writes that women's work within the family has helped to maintain traditional family patterns and thus supported traditional divisions of gender and class. She points out that because of traditional expectations of family life such as the family should be a respite from the outside world and a place of emotional expression rather than work, that women's "work" in the family has remained invisible. She writes, "Because this work of social construction is largely invisible, such efforts simultaneously produce the illusion that this form of life is a 'natural' one" (p. 91).

DeVault (1991) found that it was typical for women in her study to define the work they do within their families as central to their identity while at the same time minimizing the effort required to complete the work and also minimizing the influence of gender on their responsibilities. Most of the women voiced feelings of full responsibility for the work of feeding their families. DeVault discusses not only the direct work involved with feeding the family such as food preparation and eating, but also to the emotional work of knowing what foods please family members, keeping mental tabulations of what food needs to be bought, as well as planning menus and eating times around other family members' schedules. In conclusion, she writes

All women live their lives in the shadow of social demands for 'womanly' care. Whether women embrace or resist responsibility for the work I have discussed, they are subject to cultural expectations surrounding women's personality and what we owe to others. As women act in the social world, discourses of caring are part of a context that powerfully shapes their actions. (p. 232)

As evidenced throughout this section on the work of caregiving, it is apparent there are some significant issues to be examined in relation to women's work of caring for others, in the case of the current research, mothers caring for dependent children.

The influence of gender and the marital relationship

There is a tremendous amount of research on the various facets of the marital relationship. This section will focus specifically on the influence of both gender and the marital relationship within the context of parenting. According to Belsky (1984), the marital relationship is the most significant form of support to mothers, which helps one understand the role of support in the process of parenting and subsequently child development outcomes. As couples become parents, new and often unforeseen challenges arise. Cowan and Cowan (1992) in their influential research related to a couple's transition to parenthood write

Partners who become parents describe an ideology of more equal work and family roles than their mothers and fathers had; actual role arrangements in which husbands and wives are sharing family work and care of the baby less than either of them expected; more conflict and disagreement after the baby is born than they had reported before; and increasing disenchantment with their overall relationship as a couple. (pp. ix-x)

Two significant areas related to parenting and the marital relationship are the issues of both gender divisions of household labor and gender divisions of childcare. As discussed in the previous section, women typically end up taking on primary responsibility for both of these roles. Demo and Acock (1993) in looking at families and the division of domestic labor found that while women typically do an average of 70% of the household work, they frequently perceive their share of the housework as equitable when in fact literally speaking it is not. Demo and Acock point out that this could be due to a few different factors – one being that women often compare themselves to other women rather than to their husbands or other men, thus making their share of housework seem comparable to others and secondly that because of traditional definitions of work, women often do not appreciate or realize the variety or volume of family work they actually do. Interestingly, their findings did not differ based on groups divided into those who work for pay 30 or more hours per week versus those who do not work for pay. Contrary to what one might expect, there were no significant differences; both groups felt their share of work was equitable.

DeVault (1991) considered several gender differences in the way family housework is divided among couples. In her research, she also found it common for women to downplay the actual amount of work they do to maintain the family. She discusses how women's work within families serves to uphold traditional patterns and she focuses on the effects of societal instructions for being a "wife" and especially those related to "mothering." DeVault talks about how middle-class women typically take on more roles in both paid labor force and continue to take on more home responsibilities thus limiting the caring within the family, which society then labels as a problem and lays the blame with the mother. DeVault writes

By doing the work of 'wife' and 'mother,' women literally produce family life from day to day, through their joint activities with others. By 'doing family' in traditional ways, household members sustain and reproduce the 'naturalness' of prevailing arrangements. (p. 13)

According to DeVault, women shoulder a substantial level of responsibility for their families' well being and much of the work within this context can seem as 'womanly' service for men. She found that women use preparing and serving food as a source of pride and duty to please their husbands exemplified by the following comments from her respondents: "I suppose a lot of it is influenced by his day. He is in a very demanding work situation. It's almost as though a decent meal is a reward for getting through a difficult day;" or "I like to cook things that make my family happy. I really do. I love to cook things that make my husband lean back in his seat and say, 'that was a good dinner lady.' That's very important" (p. 41).

DeVault (1991) found two general kinds of gender organization within the families she studied. She found that men are able to refuse participation in doing family work and they are not held accountable for doing the work, and that men who do family work are considered the exception rather than the rule. This is a significant area of discussion related not only to household labor but also specifically to issues of childcare and what differences exist between maternal and paternal roles.

Michael Lamb (1995) in examining the changing roles of fathers defines three components of father involvement: engagement or interaction, defined as actual one-on-one time with child; parental accessibility, defined as being accessible to the child even though not directly engaged, such as doing the laundry while the child plays in the other room; and third, responsibility, defined as more than just helping out (e.g., knowing when child needs to go to the pediatrician, making the appointment, and taking the child). The area of responsibility would also involve deciding what the child wears, buying clothes, making child care arrangements, and various other "worry" and planning aspects. Lamb writes, "The largest discrepancy between paternal and maternal involvement is in the area of responsibility" (p. 25). He points out that this holds true whether the mother is employed outside of the home or not.

Also related to his findings, Lamb (1995) discusses how the mother being "on the job" more than fathers leads to an eventual separation of maternal and paternal roles. He writes

Not surprisingly, mothers become more sensitive to their children, more in tune with them, and more aware of each child's characteristics and needs. By virtue of their lack of experience, fathers become correspondingly less sensitive and come to feel less confidence in their parenting abilities. Fathers thus continue to defer to and cede responsibility to mothers, whereas mothers increasingly assume responsibility, not only because they see it as their role, but also because their partners do not seem to be especially competent care providers. (p.27)

Another author, Diane Ehrensaft (1995), also discusses the responsibility component of maternal versus paternal caregiving. She terms this component as the "psychological management" of parenting. Ehrensaft interviewed mothers and fathers who claimed to purposefully take on a shared parenting role. These parents ranged in age from 21-47 and all were engaged in professional careers or obtaining college educations. While Ehrensaft found a "fairly even distribution of time involvement, a willingness to be flexible and cover for each other, and a firm commitment to the identity and functions of primary parenting..., feelings about being a parent and the emotions called into play in the child-rearing arena were very different for these fathers and mothers" (pp. 48-49). She found that mothers spent more time and thought related to children's clothing and mothers spent more time thinking about children even when they were not together. She writes, "Their [mothers] 'internal mothering switch' is permanently set to the 'on' position... fathers, in contrast, have a more 'nine-to-five' quality in their parenting involvement... When it comes to parenting, they definitely have access to an on-off switch" (p. 49).

Ehrensaft (1995) discusses the implications that this full-time "on" mothering has for the mothers themselves, including the difficulties women face when attempting to disengage oneself from one's children. This identification with the mothering role becomes so internalized that "structuring time for herself removes her from her child and threatens that very relationship" (p. 53). Because men seem to better distance themselves from the parent-child relationship they often have a smoother time in negotiating separate time from their children. She writes, "At a very deep level, separations were simply not as great a loss for the men and they found them much easier to negotiate. Not one man

talked about his existence being at stake or about total confusion (What am I to do, who am I without her/him?) in response to separations. Several women did” (p. 56).

While one could argue, and rightly so, that the above “conditions” are based on deeply held societal stereotypes about male and female roles and due to differential socialization of boys and girls, reality shows that this is the state of relationships for many husbands and wives. We therefore need to move to looking more closely at how to break down these barriers. Several researchers have pointed out the role women play in serving as “gatekeepers” to controlling paternal involvement in what they likely grew up considering a more maternal domain. Pamela Jordan (1995) writes, “Shared parenting could only become a reality when the barriers set up by women as well as men were broken down” (p. 62). She cites studies that provide evidence of the powerfulness of mother’s attitudes and beliefs about paternal involvement in predicting actual paternal involvement. In her own research, she has found the following related to father’s perspectives of their involvement: Men felt women had a biological advantage to parenting evident through women’s ability to be pregnant, give birth, and lactate. These men attributed “innate and instinctual parenting capabilities to their mates” (p. 64). Men in her study said things such as how they can’t diaper right or do other caretaking things as well, so they pull back from involvement, whereas these same men express a desire that their wives would understand they are just doing it differently. Based on her findings, she writes, “In order to promote paternal involvement, the mother needs to develop an awareness of the perception of herself as chief parent and acknowledge to her mate the inaccuracy of this assumption, which not all women seemed willing or able to do” (p. 64). Jordan cites another of her studies in which she found the following themes related to what mothers want and expect of their mates as they become parents: During pregnancy – understand and support me; during labor – be with me; and after the birth – help me. She writes

Each of the mothers dealt with the ongoing challenge of the division of labor. Though they acknowledged and appreciated their mate’s role as provider and the demands on him outside the home, they nonetheless wanted help with the baby and household responsibilities....Each

mother also struggled with the tenuous balance between her need for help and the need for things to be done *right*... (p. 68)

Allen and Hawkins (1999) also look at this concept of maternal gate keeping, specifically how mothers' beliefs and behaviors inhibit greater father involvement. They look at maternal gate keeping within a framework of social construction of gender and along three dimensions: mothers' reluctance to relinquish responsibility over family matters by setting rigid standards, external validation of a mothering identity, and differentiated conceptions of family roles. These authors believe we need to look at structural, cultural, familial, and personal barriers to increased father involvement in family work. Part of this includes looking at "how women's beliefs and behaviors toward men's involvement affect actual levels of involvement" (pp. 199-200). They found three major patterns in gendered participation in family work – first, sharply differentiated family responsibilities; second, women's investment in domestic skills; and third, expertise and resistance to challenges to the prerogative of gender specialization. They discuss how the 19th century "culture of maternalism" facilitated the polarization of separate sex-typed spheres and the late 19th and early 20th century "professionalization of motherhood" encouraged women to approach home and maternal "duties" as they would a career. Thus, it appears based on these authors' findings that women's roles in the home sphere do offer a certain level of power and autonomy, specifically in relation to interactions with their spouse.

DeVault (1991) writes regarding the power structures within families:

It shows that the groups we call families are built on patterns of shared activity, and that the shape of such a pattern – who does what work in each society – produces a characteristic pattern of opportunities and relative power for typical men and women. (p. 14)

Kranichfeld (1987) discusses how past research has focused on the marital relationship within family power while in fact it seems to be the parent-child relationship that more so makes up the complexities of family power. He points out that while the existing literature does not portray women as holding power, that typically this power has been defined by male standards such as economic,

religious, or political power. He believes that when viewed from a different perspective, specifically related to the role women play in rearing children, women in fact hold substantial power within the family relationship. He writes

As a group, women continue to struggle for greater equality and justice, but as individuals almost never do so by choosing to sever the bonds that connect them to other people, from which they derive tremendous sustenance and reward. That women are not simply an angry and resentful aggregate informs us that the current literature on women and power tells only part of the story. (p. 44)

Acknowledging that perhaps men and women hold different kinds of social power causes one to consider the normative male definition of power within the context of what kinds of power women hold and how they use that power within relationships, especially within their families.

Josselson (1987) in her book Finding Herself: Pathways of Identity Development in Women focuses on the transition for women from adolescence into adulthood. She talks about how the shift has moved from being dependent on a husband and family to being more assertive and independent. She writes, "Relationship is out; achievement is in" (p. 2). She writes of the superwoman image sought by many and discusses how a woman's place has been defined by societal and cultural ideals of the time, which "tell them whether they are doing a good job at being women" (p. 2). As women move away from being defined by men, they are left with more choices for self-expression, and Josselson writes about this: "the process of deciding what she most deeply wants coincides with the formation of her identity" (p. 3). As one takes on the task of studying motherhood, it becomes evident that mixing individual identity development along with the tasks of becoming a mother are often contradictory and probably always a challenge. The need for further studies to understand women's development is evident in Josselson's words; she writes, "Despite all that has been written about women, few have studied women phenomenologically or have been interested in their self-definition, allowing them to tell their stories" (p. xiii). The current study allows the participants to do just that – "tell their stories."

METHODOLOGY

Research question

The purpose of this study is to allow mothers' voices to be heard, not framed by a researcher's inquisitive mind, but framed instead by women's everyday lived experiences of being mothers. Ellen Ross (1995) discusses the need to bring women's experiences as mothers into the spotlight. She writes, "Without full recognition of the phenomenology of mothering, the ability of feminist scholarship to comprehend the scope of women's lives today is much diminished" (p. 399).

Vangie Bergum (1989) in her book Woman to Mother asks, "How does a woman come to understand herself as a mother?" (p. 7). It is precisely this that the present study examines, although I am interested not specifically in the process of becoming a mother, but in the process of *being* a mother. Simply put, the research question is this – How does mothering affect women's lives?

Researcher as instrument

In qualitative research, the researcher plays an active role in the data collection process, therefore becoming part of the research. Because of this, it is important to address the personal beliefs and experiences I bring to this research project in order for the reader to better understand the lens through which I will interpret the results. I will first provide a brief overview of my academic background and then discuss my experience of mothering along with any pertinent personal beliefs or attitudes I bring to this research.

I am currently a doctoral student in the department of Human Development and Family Studies where I also completed my Master's degree. Although I have a non-specialized degree, my areas of interest include parenting, child development, and family intervention. I have held various graduate assistantship roles in the department, including teaching assistant for various child development courses as well as a human sexuality course, research assistant for one project related to family financial management and one related to social services, independently teaching a summer class (Development and Guidance in Middle Childhood), and serving as an academic advisor to

undergraduate child and family service majors. I recently completed my fourth year of academic advising. I have been in graduate school for the past 5 ½ years.

My interest in the topic of motherhood is not new, given that my Master's thesis was on adolescent motherhood. My focus there, however, was more on how the adolescent "copes" with her role as a mother based on her life experiences and circumstances and how becoming a mother impacts the adolescent's own development. When beginning my search for a dissertation topic my interest in motherhood swayed more toward exploring the overall experience of being a mother and how becoming a mother impacts a woman's identity. After completing the research for the present study, it does however seem that this too is somewhat about how a woman "copes" with her role as a mother. In this study I am looking at a different group of mothers. I would be deceiving the reader if I did not point out that my shift in focus comes from becoming a mother myself and wanting to understand the complexities of my role as a mother. In the following paragraphs, I will highlight some of those complexities that led me to do this study.

I first *became* a mother rather unexpectedly. On an afternoon's notice in the winter of 1996, my husband and I became foster parents to a set of twin girls. They were 18 months old at the time and lived with us for about 14 months. After the girls left, I was a foster mother to a 4-year-old little boy for about 4 months. While I had been a foster mother for about 2 years by this time, it wasn't until the birth of my first son, Skyler, in September of 1997 that I considered myself a mother. This is likely due to the fact that for the first three children I mothered it was not a permanent arrangement; therefore, I didn't experience the same type of emotional bond that I did with my son. I would describe Skyler's birth as one of the most joyous and exhilarating moments in my life. For me, the experience of giving birth was a very empowering experience. In the days, weeks, and months that followed, I found myself experiencing a wide array of emotions. My initial interest in exploring the topic of motherhood was borne out of my own grappling with these intense emotions.

I again *became* a mother in February 1999 first as foster mother to a 5-year-old boy named Jonathan and later through his adoption in October 1999. My husband and I had not planned to adopt children at this time; however, I immediately developed a bond with Jonathan unlike the bond I had formed with our other foster children. While becoming a mother through adoption was certainly different to me than giving birth to my first son, I would not describe it as any less intense or joyous.

I *became* a mother for a third time in May 2000 to another son, Tristan. Thus, it is clear that mothering has become a central focus in my life. In becoming a mother, I felt as if a new identity, different and separate from my previous self, had emerged. In talking with other mothers, I learned that how we each interpret this emotional “transformation” varies significantly from mother to mother, yet there does seem to be several underlying commonalities among mothers. I became interested in understanding how mothers define who they are and what it means to be a mother.

I feel it is important for the reader to have a glimpse of how the experience of mothering has played out in my life. I have always loved children and desired to have a career in which I could work with children and families. My commitment to a career has been strong, evident by my many years spent pursuing an advanced degree. While I knew I wanted to have children myself, I was not aware of the impact this would have on my feeling towards pursuing a career at the same time, at the same level I thought I desired. At no point before I became pregnant or during my pregnancy did I ever consider that I would not want to have a full-time career. However, just 2 weeks after my son was born and I needed to go back to classes, I did not want to leave him even for the few hours to go to class. While my professor had suggested I bring the baby to class with me, I had initially thought this was a ludicrous idea – who brings their baby to class with them? However, 2 weeks into motherhood this idea seemed quite appealing, so I took my son to class with me. I continued taking my son to class and work with me until he was 4 months old. At that time, I hired a part-time caregiver to come into our home to care for him.

While this was not a bad experience, I struggled with my personal desire to be home with Skyler. Most people advised me that this was just adjustment to first time motherhood and assured me that my apprehension would soon pass. However, 18 months later this apprehension had not disappeared. In fact, it was stronger than ever. I took the next summer off and in the fall went back to work only 10 hours per week. After much soul searching and many lengthy conversations with my husband, friends, family, and other mothers, I decided that I want to stay home with my children while they are young. Along with this decision came some new apprehension – apprehension about how my colleagues would react, about how I would maintain an identity separate from that of being a mother, and how I would balance commitment to my children with commitment to my individual goals.

While this apprehension has not subsided, I feel a new sense of contentment having made a decision I feel happy about. I believe that feeling “happy” and content about one’s decisions related to mothering is an important connection in building a positive relationship with one’s children. While my decision to stay home is borne out of personal desire, it is also shaped by my spiritual beliefs, childhood experiences, and my beliefs about what is “best” for children. While I do not advocate that all women stay home and not pursue a career, I would advocate that if possible an ideal situation would be providing very young children with one-on-one care, whether this is the mother, father, grandparent, or other significant caregiver. I feel this belief did not bias my interpretations in this study: I did not find significant differences in the experiences of mothering described by women who stayed home versus those employed full time. Several mothers in the study commented on this as they found it surprising as well. One mother commented

After the focus group, I was surprised to hear that there weren’t so many differences [between employed and at-home mothers] and that there were women who were total career track that are now full-time stay home moms, that her thoughts and fears are really not all that different. (Holly)

Part of my own experience as a mother that made me interested in pursuing a research study on women's experiences as mothers is that during the transition to motherhood and as I struggled with the personal decisions I discussed above, sometimes I felt alone, while at other times I was bombarded with suggestions to the point it seemed my own feelings were not being heard or understood. As will be discussed later, one of the major implications arising from this research was the lack of support the mothers in the study felt they had and what they perceived as a lack of awareness for the issues mothers face.

Before discussing the findings of this study, the following section highlights the methodology of the research. It provides details of the research design including the basic procedures used to conduct the study, methods used to recruit participants, an overview of focus groups and individual interviews, analysis procedures, methods to ensure trustworthiness, and finally an overview of the mothers who participated in the study.

Procedures

This research was conducted using an "open design." Dobbert (1982) distinguishes between an open research design and the focused research design. He defines the purpose of open research as used to "generate hypotheses and questions to create an overall cultural view" (p. 51). He gives examples of the types of questions that might be asked in an open research design, including: What is it like being a member of the group in question? What are the main patterns for the group? How do members think about themselves and their situations? These types of questions were quite relevant when exploring the perceptions mothers have about themselves as mothers.

Before beginning data collection for this study, approval was sought from the Human Subjects Review Board at Iowa State University. This research project was funded by a \$1000 grant from the Women's Studies Program at Iowa State University. This funding was awarded based on review of proposals submitted related to research which would add to our understanding of women's lives. The research was also supported by a \$250 grant from the Graduate Student Research Fund in

the College of Family and Consumer Sciences, Iowa State University given to graduate students for thesis or dissertation research.

For this study, focus groups and individual interviews were the primary method of data collection. Focus groups included six to eight women in each group and lasted approximately 2 hours each. Nine individual interviews were conducted lasting approximately 2 hours each. All of the focus groups and individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The focus groups were videotaped, as well, to allow for later observation of group interaction and as a backup method to audiotaping.

In addition to recording the spoken information from focus groups and interviews, it was important to record all relevant details of the setting, nonverbal cues from the informants, as well as personal insights that arose during the interviews. This information was recorded through field notes taken in an on-going research journal. During the focus groups, the help of an outside recorder was utilized. The same person served in this role for each focus group. The focus group recorder was chosen primarily because of her familiarity with focus group protocol. Also, she is not a mother herself, thus lending her objectivity to the subject. She was a doctoral student in Early Childhood Education from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies and was at the time completing a focus group study of her own. The recorder sat in the room during the focus groups and did not participate in the discussions in any way other than to record all interaction from the group as well as her own personal insights of any information she perceived as useful. I recorded the field notes during individual interviews.

Deciding how to recruit mothers for the study was a difficult task. Given the diversity of motherhood, many different approaches could be taken. Initially I considered trying to achieve a wide representation of “different” types of mothers (i.e. adolescent mothers, single mother, adoptive mothers, at-home mothers, mothers of different races, etc.); however, for the scope of one study this was not feasible. Therefore, I chose to narrow the study somewhat by focusing on mothers who share

similar characteristics. While there were various approaches one could take to recruit mothers, such as putting an advertisement in the paper, going to local agencies or places where mothers would be, etc., the most efficient method appeared to be to use the resources available to me; thus I went first to mothers I knew.

Because I did not want to conduct the study with women I know, I asked mothers I know to provide me with a list of mothers they were acquainted with. If I knew any of the women on their lists, I took those names off. I initially brainstormed to come up with a list of 12 mothers I know. I did not set any criteria for myself other than thinking of women close to my age group with at least one child of preschool age or younger. This criterion was not precisely predetermined, however, it was logical to choose women similar to myself as women close to my age and in a similar parenting stage is the group I am most acquainted with. My list of 12 mothers included a few neighbors, a few colleagues, a few wives of fellow graduate students, a mother from a playgroup I attended with my children, an employee from my son's preschool, a secretary from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, a cosmetic consultant, and a woman I met through foster care. Ironically, this group was fairly balanced in terms of employment status, number of children, and level of education. Of the 12 women, four were employed full time, four part time, and three stayed home full time. Seven had two children, two had one child, two had three children, and one woman had five children. Related to level of education, four had 2-year Associate or technical degrees, three had Bachelor's degrees, four had Master's degrees, and one had a doctorate degree. All 12 women would be described as middle-class.

To solicit a list of mothers from these women, they were contacted by phone (see script in Appendix A). Because most of them knew I was working on my dissertation research, I briefly explained why I was calling, asked if they would be willing to provide a list of names and phone numbers of mothers they knew, and explained the guidelines they should follow when thinking of names. They were asked to include only mothers living in Ames or surrounding communities, who

grew up in the United States, who were close to their age group, and who had at least one child of similar age to theirs. They were instructed that the number of children mothers have did not matter. They were also advised to write the first names that “pop into your mind” and to try not to choose mothers they feel are the best moms, the most interesting, or most unique. It was suggested that their list should be between 10 and 25 names.

After obtaining these 12 lists, the names were separated individually by list into 12 separate envelopes. One name was randomly drawn from each envelope. That name was written on the back of the envelope to indicate which name was chosen from each and that person was then called to invite them to participate in the project (see script in Appendix B). I first introduced myself and explained how I got their name along with the reason for calling – “to invite you to be part of a research project I am doing related to women’s experiences as mothers.” What would be expected from their participation in a focus group was explained and they were informed that participation was completely voluntary and confidential. They were also told that the focus group would be videotaped and that later they may be asked to participate in an individual interview.

If the person agreed to participate, she was asked a few basic demographic questions such as how many children she had, children’s ages and gender, current employment status, and her age. I thought they might feel more comfortable if they could have someone they knew come along and also it would help broaden my sample, so I asked if they would be willing to give the names of three friends they thought would be willing to participate. They were told that one of the three people would be invited to participate. They were given the same criteria for listing names as given to the original 12 women. Often times even coming up with three names seemed difficult. While they were asked for names somewhat on the spot, it is reflected in the final results that women were often lacking strong support networks of other mothers. Finally, the women were asked to choose a convenient time to participate by asking them to pick from one of four scheduled focus groups. If I was unable to reach the first name I drew after several attempts or if participation didn’t work because

of a time conflict, I went back to the envelope, chose another name, and followed the procedure described above.

After recruiting 12 women from the original 12 lists, I began calling people from their lists of three friends. The same script was followed changing it to reflect how their names were obtained (see script in Appendix B). Most often, the first person contacted was willing to participate, although some could not. Often those persons were interested in participating in the project and wanted to join a different group with a more convenient time. In these instances, the original person was called back to find out if they would like to come to the group without knowing someone else or if they would like me to call a different person from their list. In all situations, the person felt comfortable coming alone. After following the above procedures, it was necessary to do some further recruiting to ensure enough participation in each group. In most cases, eight or nine women were invited to each group to protect against not having enough people because of cancellations or people who did not show up. In the case that someone would call to cancel far enough in advance, I went back to the original 12 lists and again drew a name from one of the envelopes. How many women were invited from each of the 12 lists was recorded to protect against bias. No more than two names were chosen from any list. In a few cases, if someone called to cancel at the last minute and no one else from the lists could be contacted, I asked someone I knew to participate in a group. In one situation, I called a neighbor and asked her for a few names of people she thought might be willing to participate. In this case, one of those mothers agreed to participate in a focus group the next day. In another case, I asked a neighbor to participate. Because her family had recently moved into the neighborhood, I was not acquainted with her beyond talking briefly with her a few times.

A letter was sent to all the mothers who agreed to participate outlining more information about the study, reminding them of their focus group date and time, and including directions to the focus group meeting place (see Appendix C). Reminder phone calls were also made a few days before

to ensure a high turnout, which ended up being very high. For two of the four groups everyone showed up and in each of the other two groups only one person did not show up.

At the focus groups, the participants signed a confidentiality agreement and focus group procedures form (see Appendix D). This form acknowledged voluntary participation in the study with the understanding that all results would be reported anonymously using pseudonyms. It also outlined focus group requirements that were to ensure confidentiality, fairness, and respect for all participants in the group. These requirements included statements such as (a) In consideration to all participants, all opinions and points of view will be respected and (b) Each participant will be given a chance to participate in the discussion.

At the end of the focus group, participants were asked to complete a participant information form (see Appendix E), in which they were asked basic demographic questions such as their age, age and sex of their children, marital status and if applicable age, occupation and level of education of their spouse, their own educational background, their perception of which social class they belonged to, as well as religious affiliation. They were also asked to briefly describe their employment history since the birth of their first child, including the type of work, number of hours/week, length of time at each job, and length of maternity leave. In addition to these demographic types of questions, mothers were asked to respond to a few open-ended opinion based questions. The information obtained from this form is summarized in a later section describing the mothers in the study.

Focus group interviews

The first source of data collected for this study was from focus groups. Based on information from the Research Institute for Studies in Education (RISE), a focus group is defined as:

A carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive non-threatening environment, appropriate when the goal is to explain how people regard an experience, idea, or event, and conducted with a small number of people by a skilled interviewer. (Lively & Kemis, 1997, p. 2)

The primary purpose of the focus groups were to bring together mothers to have them talk openly about their experiences of being mothers in order to use this information to guide further individual interviews. This aspect of the study was very important, as I wanted the information to emerge directly from the mothers' perspectives rather than from my hunches and objectives. By first conducting focus groups using a very broad set of questions, I was able to use results from these focus groups to guide the individual interviews. The themes that emerged from the focus groups were used to develop the interview guide for the individual interviews. This allowed for a more emergent research design allowing for the process to be guided directly from the mothers' experiences. Four focus groups, which lasted approximately 2 hours each, were conducted with six to eight mothers in each group. Refreshments were served at each group. The mothers enjoyed having a chance to talk about their experiences as mothers: in fact they stayed well after the group was over and continued talking to each other. Each group stayed close to an hour after the focus group was done, which might point to the need for more support networks where mothers can talk about their experiences. During recruitment, one mother commented, "Sure, I would love to participate in this project. It is not every day that someone asks you to talk about what it is like to be a mom."

Each focus group was held in a conference room in the Child Development Building at Iowa State University. This location was chosen for its convenience in parking and because it is within my department. The room was arranged with chairs in a circle so everyone would be facing each other. These chairs were not arranged around a table as having a table might serve as an obstacle to open discussion. There was a table off to the side with refreshments and the forms for participants to complete. Video cameras were set up discretely in two corners of the room to get a view of all participants. The focus group recorder sat in a chair separate from the group off to the side and did not participate but only observed and took notes. The following paragraphs highlight how the focus groups were conducted.

Weiss (1994) reminds the researcher that the informant is the expert and it is her reality that we are trying to tap into. Dobbert (1982) points out “because the researcher’s aim in using informants is to uncover patterns and not to get questions answered, the researcher cannot, like the interviewer, direct the conversation” (p. 114). Using an interview schedule means that the perceived important issues are already predetermined by the researcher, whereas with an open design, the use of the informant means to “determine what patterns the informant sees and considers important enough to bring up” (Dobbert, 1982, p. 115). Based on this information, I did not want to use a predetermined list of topics to guide future individual interviews. For this reason I first conducted focus groups, which allowed important topics to emerge from the group interaction. While an “interview guide” was developed for the focus group (see Appendix F) that included seven general areas of discussion, all topics of discussion for individual interviews emerged from information obtained during focus group interviews. In concluding each focus group, the final question was “Is there something important about being a mother that you haven’t had a chance to share?” This allowed the mothers to have the final say in our discussions.

After asking mothers to share with the group basic information such as her name, how many children she has, and children’s ages and gender, the following statement was made– “Offer your insights on what the experience of motherhood is like for you – what is it like to be a mom?” Other questions included (a) What messages, if any, do you receive about how to mother your children; (b) Describe how, if at all, being a mother influences your relationship with others; (c) Describe how, if at all, being a mother has influenced the choices you have made related to having or not having a career; (d) Describe what stereotypes you perceive from the ‘90s. How will future generations describe the stereotypical ‘90s mother; and (e) How do you feel those stereotypes impact your experience as a mother.

Individual interviews

Patton (1990) suggests setting minimum sample size and adding to it later as needed.

Typically in qualitative research the point of saturation is used as a guide for determining sample size. Saturation refers to the point when no new information or insights are gained through continued interviewing. Weiss (1994) adds, "The best answer is that you stop when you encounter diminishing returns, when the information you obtain is redundant" (p. 21). Initially a minimum sample size of 10-12 individual interviews was set. Two of the 12 women invited to participate could not participate due to time constraints. One was expecting a baby any time and the other had some personal life changes at the time that kept her from participating. The remaining 10 women agreed to participate and individual interviews were scheduled with each. After about seven to eight interviews there was what Weiss termed diminishing returns; however, because the two remaining interviews had already scheduled I decided to continue. The ninth interview was completed and the tenth woman called to reschedule her interview. Because additional data were not needed, her interview was not rescheduled.

For individual interviews, women were chosen who would be fairly representative of the total sample. For example, a few women from each focus group were chosen making sure not to over represent one group or the other. A range of employment statuses, ages of the mothers, educational level, and number of children were also taken into account. In order to protect against personal biases, the help of both the focus group recorder and my major professor was utilized when making final decisions about which women to interview. As with focus group recruitment, each person was called and asked to participate in an individual interview. If they agreed, a convenient time and place to meet was chosen. A letter was sent to each person to confirm participation and remind her of the meeting time and place (see Appendix G). To allow for the most convenience for the participant, interviews were conducted any time of the day and any day of the week. A few suggestions were offered for meeting places but the individual was allowed to choose the place. Some interviews were

conducted in the morning, a few in the afternoon, and a few in the evening as late as one beginning at eight o'clock. This interview was held at the mother's house after her children were in bed and when her husband was working late so we were able to have privacy. One other interview was held in the participant's home while her daughter was at preschool, two were held in the conference room where the focus groups had been, one interview was in my office on campus, and one at my home during a time when my husband and children were gone. Because this mother lived in the same town and because her husband and children were home, she asked if we could meet at my house. Two interviews were held at a small coffee shop in town and the final interview was held at the mother's office on campus.

Topics of discussion for the individual interviews were developed based on emergent themes from the focus groups. The five main areas of discussion included maternal sacrifice, emotional exhaustion, pressure and expectations related to mothering, connections to children, and a perceived lack of value for mothering. These themes will be discussed in depth in a later section. In the first four interviews women were asked to respond to four additional questions (see Appendix H for full interview guide), related to advice they would offer to someone considering motherhood, what would have helped ease their transition to motherhood, what they need to feel supported in their role as a mother, and how they feel this research will be beneficial to others. The first three questions did not seem to evoke any insightful data and actually took time away from discussion in other areas. It also became evident that it was best to switch the order of questions to allow for a more conversational approach. Therefore, for the final five interviews, women were first asked to talk about how they felt this research would benefit others. This often led them to talk about other themes that had emerged from the focus groups.

Another interesting aspect of the individual interviews was that these women who were so open and emotional in the focus groups seemed to take a more guarded approach in the individual interviews. I quickly learned that in order to get women to share more openly I had to be willing to

share my experiences as a mother with them. This was challenging given that I did not want to bias or hinder the flow of the conversation. I tried to find a balance of sharing my perspective enough to help them feel comfortable while at the same time maintaining the focus on their experiences. This is probably another reflection of the lack of support women feel in their mothering role; they took a more guarded approach in a one-on-one situation because there is a higher risk of being negatively judged based on responses. As will be discussed in the results and interpretation section, there seemed to be a high level of self-doubting and questioning and wanting to seem that they always “had it all together” so as not to look as what they perceived a failure as a mother. Before discussing the results and interpretations, the following sections highlight the methods for analysis, trustworthiness issues, and an overview of the mothers in the study.

Analysis

Qualitative data are analyzed inductively in that the researcher does not approach the data with preconceived hypotheses; rather the researcher allows that data to “speak for itself” (Seidman, 1998). Wolcott (1994) describes three approaches to qualitative data (a) treat descriptive data as fact, (b) expand and extend beyond description through analysis, and/or (c) interpretation. Interpretation is defined not as scientific as analysis, but as a search for an understanding and an explanation to make sense of what goes on. It is important to note that these three approaches are not mutually exclusive and each may be emphasized at various points of the research process. According to McCracken (1988), “the object of analysis is to determine the categories, relationships, and assumptions that inform the respondent’s view of the world in general and the topic in particular” (p. 42). Analysis of data for this study consisted primarily of coding of focus group and interview transcripts. Additional information was obtained from field notes. This additional information included, but was not limited to, non-verbal interactions noted by the researcher and focus group recorder, conversations with colleagues, and discussions with a group of independent coders. Wolcott (1994) writes that qualitative researchers should be good storytellers. As qualitative writers, we need to be able to engage the

reader in the stories of the informants and bring the informants' experiences to life through the words we write. Throughout this manuscript, direct quotations are used to support the findings.

Analysis was completed using McCracken's (1988) five-stage process as the following paragraphs describe. The first stage involves using the transcripts and noting each useful bit of information, which then becomes what McCracken refers to as an "observation." In this first stage, each piece of information is treated individually, not in relation to its significance to the overall aspects of the text. The crucial part of this first stage is to familiarize oneself with the transcripts. The first time through I simply read the transcripts. On the second reading, information that seemed relevant or significant to the study was highlighted and any insights and ideas that began to form were noted in the margins.

In the second stage, the researcher takes the "observations" drawn from the transcripts and continues to develop them as individual observations, but also examines their significance to each other. In the second stage, "the object here is to extend the observation beyond its original form until its implications and possibilities are more fully played out" (McCracken, 1988, p. 45). During the second stage of analysis, the transcripts were read again, this time giving special attention to the highlighted pieces of information. This information was transferred to a new set of notes independent of the original transcripts. This process was done separately for focus groups and individual interviews, thus resulting in initially four sets of notes for focus group data and nine for individual interview data. As this data were transferred, I noted how often similar themes and patterns appeared within each group of notes; the data began to take on a "life" of its own.

In the third stage, the emphasis shifted from the original transcripts to the new set of notes. I looked for the interconnectedness among my noted observations. By this stage of analysis, themes and patterns were emerging. The new sets of notes were used to actively look for similar themes and patterns across participants and groups. Initially, there was one set of overall notes for the focus group

data and one for individual interview data. Then, these were combined into one overall set of notes to provide a full picture of the findings.

The fourth stage of analysis is referred to as a “time of judgment” (McCracken, 1988, p. 46). This stage of analysis is defined as a time for the researcher to refine and lay out the final general themes of the data. At this stage, redundant themes are looked for, as well as the interrelationships between themes. At this time an organization of final themes and patterns is set out.

The fifth and final stage of analysis involves further refinement of conclusions drawn at stage four. The researcher pulls all of the pieces of data together to move beyond individual perspectives to the more generalized aspects of the study as a whole. At this stage, “the investigator’s observations are now ‘conclusions’ and ready for academic presentation” (McCracken, 1988, p. 46).

While data collection and analysis are a simultaneous process in qualitative work, Dobbert (1982) makes an important point about separating the final conclusions from the data-gathering stage. He writes, “Any assumptions, hunches, intuitions, or conclusions with which the research was begun, or that arise in the early stages, are considered questions, not answers, and that data are sought for their disconfirmation as well as their confirmation” (p. 43). It is important when analyzing qualitative data to be certain that the findings emerge from the actual data rather than from any presuppositions of the researcher. The following section discusses some of the ways to ensure confidence that the findings of this study are an accurate depiction of the actual data.

Indicators of rigor

The issue of the “validity” of qualitative research has often been scrutinized as not being scientific enough. Unlike quantitative research, the researcher cannot reduce peoples’ perceptions to numbers and tested hypotheses. Therefore, the qualitative researcher is faced with the challenge of proving research efforts as valuable and useful contributions to the academic community. As this type of research is slowly gaining acceptance in the field, more and more writers are offering ways to ensure this “validity” when doing qualitative work. Because Guba (1981) is often cited for his

discussion of the issue of trustworthiness in qualitative research. I chose to follow his suggestions for this study. Guba suggests four primary concerns in establishing confidence in one's findings – truth-value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality. A discussion of each follows along with a description of how these concerns were addressed for this study.

Truth-value refers to the confidence one has that the findings of a study are accurate. Within the naturalistic paradigm, this is referred to as credibility. Credibility in findings is often established through the use of prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, triangulation, and through member checks that are done during as well as after the interview process to ensure interpretations are a true representation of the informants. Triangulation refers to the use of multiple data sources, investigators, perspectives, and/or methods to ensure accurate representation of findings. For example, if findings remain similar when multiple independent coders analyze the data, the researcher can be more confident in the “truth” of the interpretations.

Applicability refers to the relevance the findings would have in a different, yet similar context. This is referred to as external validity or generalizability in the rationalistic paradigm and as transferability in the naturalistic paradigm. The degree of transferability is determined to the extent that the researcher uses a) thick description to help the reader make his/her own interpretations of the data and b) purposive sampling “which maximizes the range of information uncovered” (Guba, 1981, p. 86).

Consistency refers to whether the findings would be the same if replicated with the same group of informants within the same context. Within the naturalistic paradigm this is termed dependability. One way dependability is assured in a qualitative research design is by leaving a detailed audit trail, such that an external auditor could follow the research process and understand the decisions made by the researcher each step of the way. This is typically achieved by the researcher keeping a journal of all aspects of the research process, including everything from thoughts and ideas

that provoked certain lines of questioning to justification for decisions made such as how to find informants to interview and detailed accounts of all steps of the research process.

The final indicator of rigor is referred to as neutrality, the degree to which the findings are a product of the informants rather than guided by inherent biases, motivations, and perspectives of the researcher. Guba (1981) refers to this as confirmability. A researcher subscribing to the naturalistic paradigm does not purport that he/she conducts value-free research or that his/her perceptions do not enter into the research process. In order for the reader to understand the lens through which the researcher interprets the findings it is important for the researcher to make clear any inherent biases, assumptions, or perspectives he/she brings to the research process. Another way to ensure confirmability is through triangulation, which as discussed above involves a combination of various methods, perspectives, or data sources.

Guba (1981) advises that the minimum requirements to establish trustworthiness should involve the use of triangulation, member checks, thick description, leaving an audit trail, and practicing reflexivity, which makes the researcher's assumptions, biases, and perspectives clear to the reader. For the current study, all of these "tools" were utilized along with peer debriefing. Peer debriefing was done through on-going consultation with colleagues at all stages of the research process. One particularly helpful source was the focus group recorder, who because of her involvement in the focus group data collection was able to offer unique insights based on direct observations: this person was consulted throughout this project.

Triangulation was met by having three colleagues separately code samples of focus group and interview transcripts. Each person coded two sets of focus group transcripts and two individual interview transcripts. Three of the four focus group transcripts and three of the nine individual interview transcripts were used resulting in each of those transcripts being read by two others beside myself. This group of colleagues was made up of one faculty member and two doctoral students from the Department of Human Development and Family Studies. While one member of the team was a

mother, the other two were not. This added a level of objectivity to the data. Also, the mother in the group was able to validate on a personal level several connections with what the mothers from the study were saying. This was helpful to balance out my interpretations of the data to assure that my experience as a mother was not clouding my perceptions of the data. Each person independently coded their respective transcripts highlighting significant information and making a separate list of themes and categories they saw in the data. At a meeting each coder discussed her insights. The major themes and patterns I viewed as important were presented and then compared with their ideas to come to final decisions of the overall direction to take in the results and interpretations.

Applicability was addressed using thick description both in this manuscript and in the research notes. The research notes also served as part of the audit trail to meet the criteria for consistency. A thorough audit trail was developed detailing the research process. The criteria of reflexivity was met by giving the reader a personal profile of myself, and by including my direct thoughts and experiences related to my mothering experiences throughout the manuscript.

Mothers

The mothers in this study are described last to set the stage for the results and interpretations section that follows and to allow the readers to feel more connected to the women they will be reading about. A homogeneous group of 27 mothers participated in the focus groups (see Table 1). Because the sample was gathered in a university community, education levels were high and socioeconomic status was also higher than might be expected from the general population. All of the mothers were Caucasian and married, 24 to first husbands, 2 remarried after divorce, and 1 widowed and now remarried. The average length of marriage for the group was between 5 and 10 years, with 17 falling in that category. Three reported being married under five years and 7 reported being married over 10 years. The shortest length of marriage was 1 ½ years and the longest time married was 17 years.

The average age of participants was between 30 and 35 years old, with 12 women between those ages: one woman was under 24, seven between 25 and 29, five between 36 and 40, and two over 40. The youngest mother was 20 years old and the oldest was 44 years old.

Related to socioeconomic status, 16 mothers described their families as middle class, eight as upper middle, one as lower middle, and two described their families as lower class. For the two women who described themselves as lower class the reason they gave for describing their families as lower class was that their husbands were in college, one in graduate school and the other an undergraduate. Based on information from the discussions, they appeared to live a middle-class lifestyle. It is important to note that for this study, socioeconomic status was defined by the individual's self-report not by actual income levels.

Table 1. Demographics of participants

	Number
Mother's age (in years)	
Under 24	1
25-29	7
30-35	12
36-40	5
Over 40	2
Socioeconomic status (self-report)	
Lower class	2
Lower-middle class	1
Middle class	16
Upper-middle class	8
Employment status	
Not employed	7
15 hrs. or less per week	4
16-25 hrs. per week	4
26-35 hrs. per week	1
36 or more hrs. per week	11
Mother's education level	
High school diploma or GED	3
Associate's degree	1
Some credits at a 4-yr. institution	4
Bachelor's degree	13
Master's degree	3
Doctorate degree	3

Table 1. (continued)

	Number
Husband's education level	
Technical (trade school)	1
Associate's degree	1
Some credits at a 4-yr. institution	1
Bachelor's degree	9
Master's degree	10
Doctorate degree	5
Avg. length of marriage (in years)	
Less than 5	3
5-10	17
Over 10	7
Religious background	
Raised w/ religious teaching	25
Not raised w/ religious teaching	2
Currently active in religious org.	21
Not currently active	6
Number of children	
1	10
2	11
3	4
4	2
Number of children desired	
Only 1	0
2	10
3	8
4 or more	8
Undecided	1
Number of children per age category (N=52 children for 27 mothers)	
0-1 year	10
2-3 years	16
4-5 years	13
6-10 years	11
Over 11 years	2

Among all 27 women there were 52 children, 25 males and 27 females. Ten women had one child with one of those expecting her second child. Eleven women had two children with one expecting her third child. Four had three children and two had four children. Sixteen of the children were between the ages of 2 and 3. Ten were between the ages of newborn and 1. Thirteen were between the ages of 4 and 5; eleven between the ages 6 and 10 and two over age 11. Only one woman

did not have at least one child less than 5 years of age, while only five did not have at least one child under the age of 3, and there was only one mother who had a teenager. This same mother had two children under the age of 6.

When asked how many children they desired, eight women reported that they would like to have four or more children, eight would like three children, 10 want two children, and one mother of two was undecided. It was interesting that no one desired to have only one child. Twenty-one mothers planned their first pregnancy, while five did not, and one mother adopted both of her children.

Related to religious background, 25 mothers reported being raised with religious teaching, 10 Catholic, 2 in the Church of Christ, 2 Lutheran, 2 Evangelical, 7 various Christian denominations, 1 in a non-denominational church, and 1 Latter Day Saint. Twenty-one women reported that they still actively participate in a religious or spiritual organization; seven reported switching denominations from their families of origin. Six women did participate in a spiritual or religious organization when growing up and do not participate in one at this time. Two did not participate when growing up and do currently participate.

Looking at occupations and levels of education for both the women and their spouses, this is a highly educated group. First considering the husbands' occupations and education levels, 9 have Bachelor's degrees, while 10 have Master's level education. Five have a Ph.D. or D.D.S., while one has an Associate's degree and one has training in a technical area. One is currently completing requirements for a Bachelor's degree. Husbands' occupations included student, engineer, administrative director, therapist, dentist, electrician, federal employee, stay-home father, veterinarian, architect, accountant, roofer, farmer, mobile home park manager, computer programmer, and director of a youth agency.

Considering the mothers' occupations and education levels, 13 women have Bachelor's degrees, 3 have Master's level education and 3 have Doctoral degrees. Three women have high school diplomas or GED equivalency, while one has an Associate's degree and four have some

education from a four-year institution. Seven mothers were not currently employed. Of those seven, three have some credits toward a four-year degree and four have a Bachelor's degree. Four women reported working outside of the home no more than 15 hours per week and four reported being employed part time, identified as between 16 and 25 hours per week, and one mother reported working between 26-35 hours per week. Eleven mothers were employed full time. Occupations included stay-home mother, accountant, computer programmer, police officer, university professor, in-home child care provider, legal secretary, university secretary, travel agent, house cleaner, teaching assistant, nurse, schoolteacher, language interpreter, assistant director of a day care center, bank loan officer, and a researcher.

An interesting piece of information obtained from the participant information form was related to the difference in mothers' current employment statuses and their reported desired employment statuses. Twelve women were satisfied with their current situations; none of these 12 women were employed full time. Three women reported that they would like to go from part-time employment to staying home exclusively. One mother was currently employed part time but would like even fewer hours. One stay-home mother wanted to go to part-time employment. Perhaps the most interesting information was that none of the mothers employed full time expressed a desire for full-time employment. All 10 of these women reported an ideal situation for them would be part-time employment. One mother wrote an interesting comment on her participant information form related to her work history. In this comment, one can hear the self-doubt or guilt of feeling like she was working when "I should have been at home." She writes

I have stayed at the same job and worked either evening or night shifts to accommodate both work and childcare. I have cut back on commitments at work; taken children with me to work; and I've left the children at daycare so I could work when I should have been at home. (Participant information form)

In order for the reader to "get to know" the nine mothers who completed individual interviews, a brief profile of each follows:

Holly. Holly is 27 years old and has an 18-month-old daughter. Holly has a Ph.D. in neuroscience and is employed full time as an assistant professor. She has been married for four years. Her husband is completing veterinarian school. Holly describes her family as middle-class. She was raised in the Methodist religion, but currently does not participate in a religious or spiritual organization. Her pregnancy with her daughter was planned, yet she says, “a little earlier than we planned. We felt we were ready for a family and the ‘family relationship’.” She would like to have one or two more children.

Holly had 2 months of maternity leave with her daughter. In response to the questions –“If you could arrange your time just the way you wanted, which would you prefer to be doing?” Holly responded that she would much rather work part time. In fact during her individual interview she expressed a lot of doubt about her current employment situation and feels that once her husband finishes his degree she will not have to be employed to support the family financially and at that time she thinks it will be a tough decision to decide between staying home exclusively or working part time.

Holly was fairly soft-spoken, yet very insightful. She was very emotional as she talked about her experience as a mother, at times becoming tearful as she described her connection with her daughter and what that means to her. She has experienced a certain level of disappointment from several of her colleagues because of her choice to take on a teaching position. She said that in her field, research is most important and it is expected for students to do post-doctorate research study, which typically involves relocating to work with people who specialize in different aspects of the field. While she planned to move on from Iowa State after completing her degree, once she had her daughter she decided to stay close to family and not pursue a research career at this time. She expressed a feeling of dissatisfaction that mothers are faced with such stigmas for choosing to make decisions based on what they feel is best for their families.

Terri. Terri is a 36-year-old mother of two: she has a 5-year-old girl and 21-month-old boy. She has a Bachelor's degree in marketing and finance and was employed full time for nine years before becoming a stay-home mom. Her daughter was 9 months old at that time. She and her husband have been married for nine years. He has a master's degree and is employed as an engineer. Terri describes her family as middle-class. She was raised in a Catholic family and actively participates in that faith. Both of her children were planned and she is not planning to have more children, primarily due to health reasons as Terri lost a baby at birth.

While she is not currently employed she says that she "would be open to part time when the youngest is in school." When describing her family on her participant information form, she wrote

Our family looks similar to Leave it to Beaver. The mother takes on the home, creating the family environment and the father is the breadwinner. The father is involved in the family, giving baths, putting children to bed although he tends to follow the mother's lead. The mother is the caregiver. I feel that society puts the childrearing on the mother.

Terri appears very confident and satisfied with her role as a stay-home mother. She claims that she runs her family like a business and that she enjoys being the manager of the home. Several times she expressed that she likes being able to have the time to be involved in her children's activities. She stated that having her daughter go to school is going to be difficult, as she will no longer have control over her daughter's environment. Terri was an out-going person with a very cheerful personality. Possibly related to her out-going personality, she seemed to be the mother in the group who most sought outside support and networking to help her with her mothering needs.

Shelly. Shelly is 26 years old. She has a 21-month-old son. She has a Bachelor's degree in education and previously did missions work and teaching. She is now pursuing her Master's degree in English and is currently employed 20 hours per week on top of being a full-time graduate student. She is in the later stages of finishing her degree. Shelly pointed out that she was employed until her son was 2 ½ months old and at that time until he was 9 months old did substitute teaching no more than three days a week. She began graduate school when her son was 9 months old.

Shelly has been married for six years and describes her family as middle-class. Her husband is finishing his Ph.D. in a therapy related field. She and her husband were both involved in the Church of Christ while growing up and continue to participate in that faith. While her pregnancy was planned, she mentioned that it was really her husband who most wanted a child at that time. She said, "Originally my husband wanted a child more than I did. I wasn't entirely sure I wanted one even when I was first pregnant." She later added

I think some of the reasons we wanted a child were because it would be ours, from us; because of the joy and hope for the future children can give; and because children teach you so much about life and what it really means.

It is interesting that Shelly is the only mother of the nine, who completed individual interviews, who did not describe a strong and intense connection with her child. In fact, she expressed some feelings of insecurity because she felt somewhat distant from her son and didn't seem to have the same deep connection that she has heard other mothers talk about.

While she was unsure about the timing with her first, she would like to have one or two more children. She wrote that her "ideal" situation would be working part time outside of the home; however, throughout our conversation, she seemed to have mixed feelings about this. She expressed a belief that it was probably best for the children if the mother could stay home, yet she didn't seem satisfied in this role. She wanted some outside professional involvement. Overall, this is a stressful time for Shelly as she and her husband are both finishing degrees and the path they will be taking for the future with their careers and family is somewhat unsure. Shelly mentioned that they will likely be moving soon and having been here only a few years she has had a hard time developing friendships because she knew they would be moving on.

Rachel. Rachel is a 31-year-old mother of two. She has a 10-year-old girl and a 6-year-old boy. She has a Bachelor's degree in education and is currently employed full time as a junior high school teacher. She describes her workload as "40 hours at the building and approximately 12 hours at home." She said that she has to bring home schoolwork pretty much every night. From the birth of

her first child until the first year and a half, Rachel worked two jobs and was a full-time student. When her daughter was 1 ½ years old, she cut back at school to part time and worked part time as a preschool teacher for the next year and a half. After the birth of her son she continued as a part-time student, but quit her part-time teaching job until after graduating when she began working full time. While she says she is satisfied with her current position because she is able to have the summers off, in her individual interview she commented that she *longs* to be home with her children.

Rachel and her husband have been married 10 ½ years. Her husband has a Bachelor's degree and is employed as an engineer. She describes her family as upper-middle-class. Rachel was raised in the Christian religion but no longer participates in a religious or spiritual organization. Rachel's pregnancy with her first child was not planned. She and her husband were both college students at the time. While she said she would define her transition to motherhood as fairly smooth, what she described was a fairly rough transition. She commented during her interview

When I first became pregnant, I was in college and I wasn't ready. So my husband wanted Briane, and I wasn't sure if I was ready yet... I was wondering am I ready, am I responsible enough, am I adult enough, can I support this child? But he had no doubts.... We had our life before the kids and while you are pregnant you just sort of prepare for the kids. I don't really miss the way things used to be because I like the way they are now.... I see the future to the point where it is not important what it was like before. (Rachel)

Related to how she dealt with this stressful transition she said

I think in today's society with all the child abuse and neglect and all those things, people, especially mothers, are not allowed to have negative feelings toward their kids. I had a really hard time with that with my first child because she wasn't planned. I wasn't ready emotionally either. The pregnancy was awful. After the pregnancy wasn't the best so the little thought run through your head; what happens if this happens and what do I do when she won't stop crying. And she is hungry again and you aren't used to being responsible for somebody else. You start feeling negative towards, not the child, but the child's actions to the point where you don't think very nice thoughts. And I think with today's society, you feel guilty and you don't want anyone knowing you think those thoughts because if you do, you are a bad person. Finally... I had several talks with my mom, but she reassured me that everyone has those thoughts. We have gone through a couple of parenting classes to make ourselves feel better. And through talking to other people, you find out that you are not the only one having these thoughts. (Rachel)

Rachel and her husband do not want to have more children. She wrote an interesting comment on her participant information form about the societal pressures for mothers and fathers. She wrote

Society has played a big part in how mothers are viewed. In turn this puts pressure on women as mothers. Attitudes have only changed slightly for fathers. The amount of pressure women put on themselves is greater.

While Rachel described her and her husband's parenting views as similar, she talked about not having time for herself as her husband does and this causing her to feel out of control at times, what she called "to the point of breaking." She also talked about not having "down time" with her children because they were always so busy, her working and her children with extracurricular activities. She said in our interview,

We are too busy. Right now it feels like we are just going through the motions of a family. We still do everything together, but we are just moving from one place to another, from one activity to another....Like last week, our whole week was packed with different activities and I finally said forget it; we are staying home. My husband went out and did his thing and the kids and I just, I just needed to be home. The kids appreciated that. We actually got to watch TV for the first time in months. (Rachel)

Despite the various struggles Rachel has experienced and is experiencing as a mother, she talked about it all being well worth it. She said

I think it is okay to let them [women without children] know [the challenges of motherhood], but also let them know they will be rewarded, that it is not all negative. Yes, your life is going to change and some of your dreams may not be realized or may be forgotten, and let them know that it is not an easy road, but that it is worth it. (Rachel)

Brenda. Brenda is 34 years old. She has three daughters, ages 6, 3, and 5 months old. She has a Bachelor's degree in business. She describes herself as a stay-home mom, even though she spends 2 to 3 hours per week cleaning homes. Brenda shared that she had always wanted to be a mom and stay home with her children. She said that the main reason she went to college was because at the age of 10 her father died and she saw her mother struggle to make it. She said

People would ask what you wanted to do after you graduated and I said my main reason for going to college was when I was 10, my dad died of a brain tumor and left my mom with four fairly young kids. She had only gone to one year of college, never worked, was a stay-home mom and all of a sudden, she was in the work force. I remember always thinking that I would at least get a degree so if something did happen I could get a job. (Brenda)

Brenda did work full time until her first child was 18 months old. She had 6 weeks of maternity leave and did not want to work full time but needed to financially. When her first daughter was 18 months old, Brenda cut back from full-time employment to a two-day per week job as a receptionist in an accounts payable department. It is important to point out here that because she had a Bachelor's degree in business, this was a position she was highly over-qualified for. It seems that several mothers in the study sacrificed higher-level jobs and took positions they were over-qualified for in order to maintain only part-time employment.

Brenda and her husband have been married for almost 15 years. He has a Bachelor's degree and works in a management position. Brenda describes her family as middle-class. She was raised in a Christian faith and continues to participate in that faith; in fact she describes her family as very spiritual and focused on God. She said, "I could not be a parent without my faith."

Brenda's pregnancies have been planned and she would possibly like to have one more child. Brenda describes her "ideal" situation as staying home exclusively. She currently home schools her 6-year-old daughter. As Brenda shared her thoughts on motherhood with me, she came across as a very non-judgmental person and talked very supportive of mothers in various situations.

Whitney. Whitney is 30 years old. She has two daughters and was expecting her third child at the time of our interviews. Her oldest daughter is 7 and the second is 4 years old. Whitney has a Bachelor's degree in elementary education. Until her first daughter was 2 years old, she worked part time and attended college part time. When she finished her degree, she began staying home exclusively. Whitney shared with me her struggle to decide about staying home with her daughters. She said that it is the best thing she has done, but did comment that it took her a few years to feel confident about that.

Whitney and her husband have been married 10 years. Her husband has a Bachelor's degree and is employed as an accountant. She describes her family as middle-class. Whitney was raised

Protestant and currently participates in the Protestant religion. Whitney's first pregnancy was planned. She said, "I was young, 22, and thought it would add to my life. I'm glad I made the choice." Whitney wants to stay home until her children are older. She believes mothering is a combination of both instinct and learned behavior. She wrote on her participant information form

I was a mom who read lots of books on how to parent thinking if I did this I wouldn't make as many mistakes. One big mistake I made in the early years was not relying on my instincts like I should have.

Whitney commented about how society influences mothers' and fathers' roles in parenting:

I think being a mother is more responsibility because 'society' is more likely to put the weight of child rearing on the mother. Even if an individual household is not functioning that way I think sometimes the outside world puts it on the mother's caregiving. So regardless of whether it's actually the mother's role in that particular home, she still gets 'blamed' or conversely is 'given credit' for her child's behavior, appearance, personality, etc. When a father participates, society makes a big deal out of it. Like if you see a father in the park with his child, you think he's a really great parent, but if you see a mom in the same situation, you don't think that much of it one way or another. It is her job.

Whitney really seemed to enjoy being a mother and talked about the pleasure she feels from spending time with her daughters. She described mothering as her primary identity and feels that she puts substantial pressure on herself to live up to her expectations of what a good mother should be.

Jodi. Jodi is 37 years old. She has one daughter who is almost 3. She has a high school diploma and is employed full time as a secretary. She and her husband have been married for 7 ½ years. He is currently completing his Master's degree in a social service field. She says because her husband is currently a student, she would describe her family as lower class. She added that this should change once her husband finishes school. Jodi was raised Catholic and now participates in the Church of Christ.

Jodi's pregnancy was planned and she would like to have one more child. She has had several miscarriages and currently expresses frustration and sadness about this aspect of her life. She wrote that her "ideal" situation would be working part time. She believes mothering is a natural, instinctual,

commonsense-based task. She wrote, "I think sometimes if you put too much thought into it, that is all you do. I think you know what to do but some days you lack the confidence."

While Jodi has strong beliefs about mothering, she appears to struggle to feel confident about her "mothering" abilities. She shared that she sometimes feels jealous of her husband because she wonders if he isn't "the better parent." She commented

When I talk about the fathering thing, sometimes I get jealous of Mike, how he can be so good with her and sometimes I wonder, "if mothers are supposed to be the better parent?" Sometimes I think Mike is the better parent. She is secure with me like at night when she wakes up, she doesn't call for Mike; she calls for me. She has that bond with me. I cuddle up to her and she really cuddles up to me. Mike cuddles her, but it is not like a need, and I think Teagen senses a need from me, that I need her to cuddle me. (Jodi)

Jodi talked about her intense desire to break the negative cycles she experienced as a child and to provide her daughter with a sense of family tradition. She said

I just know I want to be different with my kids. That is one of the reasons why I don't mind the sacrifice, emotional exhaustion, and pressures and expectations. I know I am going to have an impact on Teagan. I am going to break the cycle of what my family was....My family expects you to be there and if you are not, you are a bad person. Mike's family is just the opposite. With them, you build your life; you live your life. They give you all that freedom and love you and that is what I want for Teagan....I want her to have different, so I am working on building traditions. (Jodi)

Jodi talked about that in order for her to feel she is able to be a good parent, it is important for her to have some outside interests. She said

For me, I have a passion. I love working out, so that is my passion. That is my out. So telling my husband these are the nights I am going to be gone. This is the time you have to take care of her....Mothers should have a passion besides just their children and besides just mothering. I think mothers should have an outside interest. (Jodi)

Susan. Susan is a 33-year-old mother of two. She has two daughters ages 6 and 2. She has a Bachelor's degree in political science and is employed 35 hours per week in the accounting department for a local graphical engineering company. Before her first child was born, she had been employed full time for about 7 years. When her daughter was born, she took 8 weeks off and then went back to work part time for 2 weeks before resuming full-time employment. Due to a family move, she was not employed for 9 months when her daughter was 18 months old. After 9 months she

started back to work at 20 hours per week and now, 3 years later, works approximately 35 hours per week, although doing so means sacrificing benefits of a full time career.

Related to her current part-time employment and to the lack of value for mothering, she talked about studies that have shown how much more productive parents are when they have support from their employers, such as on-site child care. She said

But society hasn't taken it to heart. They haven't accepted the fact that if mothers are going to work, there needs to be some help. It is like they drop you because you decided to do that so you have to figure out how it is going to work. For me it has worked out by sacrificing my job. I work part time. I don't have any benefits; I don't build up seniority; and I don't have the same respect as someone that is working there full time. But yet I have the flexibility and I can say in my own mind, too bad, I am part time. (Susan)

Susan and her husband have been married 12 years. Her husband has a Ph.D. and is a director at the same company where she is employed. Susan describes her family as middle to upper middle-class. She was raised Catholic and continues to actively participate in that religion. Her first child was planned. Related to why she wanted a child she wrote that it was "mostly the biological urge. We wanted one and tried to wait until the time was 'right.' I don't think there were really any concrete reasons why we wanted a child." She said that sometimes she thinks she might like to have two more children.

For Susan, she said that the hardest thing about being a mother is just "trying to be everything, trying to be the wife, the sister, the friend, and for me working, just trying to do everything." She said the easiest is "just snuggling, just holding them and doing things for them."

When she talked about thinking of having another child she said

It has no logic. I sit there and every once in a while we think, you know, another one might not be so bad. If I talk about it logically, the answer is no, this is it. I don't have the same patience level with the second that I did with the first because there are two of them and they are fighting and this and that, yet they crawl into your lap and you are just lost. (Susan)

Debra. Debra is 37 years old. She has three children, two sons ages 5 ½ and 3 and one 6-year-old daughter. Debra has a Ph.D. in language and literature. She is employed full time as an associate professor. Her description of her employment history was this:

I had my first child before tenure while I was still working full-time teaching. He was born 6 weeks premature. I took 7 weeks off and then returned to work while my husband stayed home. My second child was born in May during summer break and I returned to work in August. My third child was born in January and I took 5 weeks off before returning full time – a big mistake. I should have taken a semester off. I have continued to work throughout all pregnancies and each birth was a c-section.

Debra and her husband have been married 6 years. Her husband has a Master's degree. He is currently a stay-home dad. Debra describes her family as upper-middle-class. She was raised Catholic and currently participates in the Catholic religion. Each of her pregnancies was planned. Her reason for wanting children was this: "We were just married and I was 31. I felt that I needed to start my family now because we hoped to have several children and I was already 30." She does not plan to have more children – "three is enough, especially because of my age." She stated that her "ideal" situation would be working part time. She believes that mothering is a natural, instinctual, commonsense-based task. She wrote on her participant information form

I think 'mothering' is instinctual and I believe that some women do not have this instinct and should probably not have children. Mothering is a 'connectedness' to the child you give birth to or choose to adopt. Of course, we can all benefit from experience – our own and that of others, so to that end we can 'learn' better mothering techniques but the essence of mothering cannot be learned.

Overall, Debra talked about the importance of having support from others to help her as a mother. She also talked about her sense of dissatisfaction that mothers do not always have this support readily available to them. She talked about her disappointment and frustration in trying to combine both mothering and having a professional career and the level of pressure she feels from this. She said

I wish there were a group on campus of moms who value that and want to talk about being mothers. A lot of people don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about being a mom and trying to combine that with job tenure and promotions and expectations. (Debra)

Debra talked about how she is affected by societal messages that make her feel as if she should be the one to stay home with the children rather than her husband. She said, "I don't think you can realize how strong the social-----and other situations and families that are held up as models can

affect you.” She talked about that even though there are some sacrifices associated with being a parent, such as lack of time to spend with her husband, that overall she does not consider being a mother a sacrifice but a choice, one she would make again if she were younger. Debra was a very optimistic, insightful person. She seemed to make a strong effort to not take the simple, every day experiences in life for granted. She said

I think in our culture, yes you are told you should make time for exercise, make time for reading, relaxing-----if I have time to see a movie, it is going to be with my husband. I guess I feel bad that I don't have more time to spend with my husband; I just think spending time with your kids is so important, and it is now or never. You don't know how long you have and we don't know what is going to happen...I don't worry about time for myself at all. Give me 15 minutes to put on my makeup in the morning and do my hair and I am really really happy.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Phenomenology is not a “science” of seeking answers to specific questions or seeking solutions to specific problems; rather it is an ongoing process of seeking to understand the “meaning and significance of certain phenomenon” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 23). Phenomenologists seek to bring to light a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study, which adds to existing knowledge. With this in mind, the following discussion is merely one interpretation of the vast amount of information obtained from the research process discussed earlier. While many different directions could be taken, I am choosing to focus on portraying an understanding of how the mothers in this study give meaning and significance to their experiences of mothering, specifically in order to help others understand how mothers can better be supported and acknowledged.

There seems to be some “indescribable” experiences associated with mothering. This was echoed time and again by the mothers in my study. When asked to describe what it is about being a mother that makes it all worthwhile, these were just a few of the comments:

They [children] change you and you are changed forever.

What makes it worth being a mom? That little hug, that smile.

I think it is hard to explain. You can feel it, but when people ask you, you say it is just the enormous amount of love you have for them. It is indescribable. You think when you get married, you love your husband so much you couldn't possibly have anyone that you would love more or equally, but then you have a child and you just think WOW.

It is the smiles.

There isn't an emotion. You have your happy, or sad, or gloomy, but there really isn't an emotion as to how you feel exhilarated by your own child.

I find it challenging to put into words the powerful and moving experiences these women shared with me. The following sections highlight the experiences of the mothers in this study in their own words. Direct quotations are used to support nine primary themes that emerged from the data. These were “maternal” sacrifice, bearing the emotional “labor” of caring for children, pressures/expectations of mothering, mothers' connections to their children, mother/father differences

in parenting and the influence of the marital relationship, issues of loss surrounding motherhood, use of strong language, value of mothering, and ways this research will benefit others.

“Maternal” sacrifice

The women in this study described various types of sacrifice in their lives. Sometimes this sacrifice was related to sacrifice of basic needs such as sleeping, eating, going to the bathroom alone, and just an overall lack of privacy. The women also talked about sacrifice of personal needs such as exercise, friendships, time with husband, and financial ability to purchase material things for themselves. They also talked about career sacrifices. Two other significant issues surrounding mothers discussions of sacrifice were related first to their descriptions of “putting your life on hold,” “giving up you to raise a child,” and the feelings of always putting others first only to feel guilty should they put themselves first. The second issue was related to the mothers’ definitions of sacrifice. As they initially described the above things as sacrifice (privacy, time with husband, basic needs, career, etc.), upon further investigation it appeared that the women were very quick to define this sacrificial aspect of their lives as a positive rather than a negative. The following quotations give poignant examples of how these women described some of the sacrifices associated with being a mother.

It is a demanding thing. Once that baby comes you kind of give up your life and put it on hold. I don’t mind it but I do understand the frustrations of a mother because and so much more than a father, and I am disappointed in that because I don’t think it is necessarily fair. A mother is a mother and you have the guilt, the nervousness, the worry, you are the doctor, you are everything. (FG 4)

This woman said many things within a short paragraph. She talked about giving up her life but was quick to point out that she doesn’t mind it. In the next breath she expressed a disappointment and sense of unfairness that as a mother she is the one to make these sacrifices as opposed to the father. The next two women described this sense of putting their lives on hold as well. The first woman pointed out that she “knew” she would be putting her life on hold, insinuating a conscious decision to have children and make this sacrifice. She said

I want to be young enough when they are grown to enjoy my life because I knew I would be putting my life on hold basically to raise them and then I could get on with my life. (FG4)

When asked, "How do you define sacrifice as a mother," Jodi gave this response:

Losing yourself. You have another human being to take care of not just yourself. You can't just come home anymore and just unwind. As they get older it will be easier but not with a toddler. I miss that; I miss that freedom sometimes. Even though I am a disciplined person, and I was even before I had Teagan, there are sometimes I would just like to come home and take a nap. It is not an option anymore... (Jodi)

Overall there were five general categories related to the mothers' experiences of sacrifice.

These were related to sacrifice of (a) basic needs, (b) personal needs, (c) career sacrifices, (d) strains of always putting others' needs first, and (e) the women's tendency to reframe sacrifice into a positive aspect of mothering.

Sacrifice of basic needs

Related to sacrifice of basic needs, the following paragraphs highlight women's struggles to find time for eating, sleeping, and even going to the bathroom. In the first focus group one of the mothers jokingly commented, "How much time alone do you get in the bathroom?" The room erupted with laughter and a sense from the other mothers of "we know what it's like." One of the women in the group gave an example of how a lack of privacy in the bathroom is not typically the same for her husband. She seemed to enjoy it when he got a "taste" of what it is like to not have the "luxury" of privacy. She commented

You know I love it when he's in the restroom, "Come get them." "What do you think? They follow me in." [Another woman in the group interjects.] "Yeah, mine, one sits there and the other hands me the toilet paper." [Everyone laughs.] [The first woman continues to tell her story adding about when her husband takes a shower how he always wants her to keep the kids from bothering him.] I'm like you know let her in. You get a shower every morning by yourself so on the weekends, join the happy family. (FG1)

There seems to be some hidden hostility as she sarcastically added, "join the happy family." As we see for this woman, basic things like going to the restroom and showering are no longer private. It appears this seems to be true for other women as well.

But when I'm home the kids are glued to me and the same thing, I go in the bathroom and they just follow me. [Another woman interjects.] Yeah, privacy does not exist once you become a mother. (FG1)

Most people I know that are in my income level know sacrifice. There is the sacrifice of time; you never think you have enough time. There is the sacrifice of your own time. The other day I walked into the bathroom and I said, "Molly, I am going to the bathroom so leave me alone." She said, "No, I want to come in;" and I said, "Could I just have a minute of privacy?" She waited just a minute and then opened the door and peeked her head in and I am like, "Oh fine. Come on in." And then the dog came in and there went my two minutes. (Susan)

You sacrifice a lot of things – time to yourself. A couple weeks ago I took a bath for an hour and then I came out and my husband said what were you doing. I just wanted to be by myself because I never am really. (FG2)

There appeared to be a sacrifice of getting to eat on time or having the "luxury" of getting hot food, highlighted by the following quotations:

And it [my food] is cold. It is always cold because you are up, they need this, they need more milk and I need more of this and that. On my birthday my husband looked at them and said don't ask your mother for anything else, just let her sit down and eat. (Susan)

Even at the table I'll eat at like three instead of one and like I always get all the kids stuff ready and my husband gets his stuff ready and then I'm like I get whatever's left... [Someone interjects.] That's true I eat lunch ½ the time at two and they started at noon, and it's not really a big deal but sometimes I'll be like okay. (FG1)

[Referring to a work-related party Shelly took her son to] I was following him around and barely had time to eat myself and I really didn't have conversation with anybody. That is very typical of my life in general. (Shelly)

Finally related to meeting basic needs, the women talked about lack of sleep as a sacrifice of motherhood.

I'll tell you the hardest thing for me was when I had my second was when the first one wouldn't nap and all I wanted to do was nap, "except Mommy I'm not tired," "I don't care, I am, let me sleep." (FG1)

I was telling someone the other day that if someone would have told me the amount of sleep you can function on, or lack of sleep you can function on, I probably wouldn't have believed it until I'd lived it. I would say it is probably more, I don't know if I could have expected some of those things. On the other hand, I am amazed at how well you can actually function with the lack of sleep. (Brenda)

[My question to Holly, “What are some of the other sacrifices you make as a mother,” and her response] Well, sleep, definitely putting the needs of the child first most of the time, really all of the time, certainly basic needs. (Holly)

In the last comment as she considered her statement further, Holly pointed out her reality of not just putting the needs of the child first some of the time or most of the time but “really all of the time.”

She also pointed out that she was even putting basic needs of others before her own.

Sacrifice of personal needs

In the second category of responses, it becomes clear that women are not only sacrificing their basic needs, but also sacrificing personal needs, such as the need for time alone as well as the need for outside interests and friendships. Related to her research on women’s family work, DeVault (1991) found that women viewed serving their families as a source of pride and duty, and often sacrificed their own desires in order to please her family. For example related to deciding what to eat for a meal, DeVault writes that in contrast to their responsiveness to the tastes of others, women were careful not to let their individual preferences hold any weight. She included a quote from one of her respondents: “One of us has to compromise and it’s going to end up being me” (p. 43). In the present study, there are several examples of mothers’ sacrifices of their own needs and preferences in deference to other’s needs. Perhaps the most emotional dialogue about not having time or privacy for themselves was between women in the first focus group discussing their need for just a little “space.”

I want my own room where someone doesn’t touch my stuff [Everyone laughs and offers several interjections.]

Do you have a lock on the door?

Maybe in your next life.

I just want a little spot that’s mine.

You know the guys get the garage, what’s ours?

[Somebody suggests the kitchen and then they all agree that no because the kids are right there too – so I ask, “What is your space?” and they laugh and offer these responses]

When my husband comes home and I can go somewhere.

Like this [focus group], yeah this is our break.

Any space where I’m away from the kids is my space.

I don’t have one at home.

I try to create some every day. (FG1)

The woman who commented that she tries to create some every day was met with questions of “how do you manage that,” and “I wish I could do that.” Based on their earlier discussions about the guilt felt from putting others’ needs first, it seems the implication here for these women would be how can they create space for themselves without feeling that they are being selfish or not fulfilling their mothering responsibilities? Another telling piece about this dialogue was when asked directly, “What is your space?” the women were not able to come up with a concrete answer right away. Instead, the question was followed by awkward silence and laughter.

The next examples show how the mothers struggle to find time for themselves, whether it is to exercise or regroup after a long day at work. In the first quotation Shelly defines herself as an introvert for needing a mere half-hour a day to herself. Therefore, rather than describe not having time to herself as something unfair, she attributes her need for time alone to a personality trait within herself.

Well, I think I am one of those people that function best if I can at least have a half-hour a day of time to myself. I am somewhat introverted in that since. [She goes on to comment how hard it is to put her child’s needs first right when she gets home from work.] So we come home from picking up and he needs this, he needs that, and I would like to just take off my shoes, go in the bathroom, put comfortable clothes on, read the mail for a half-hour, and then think about supper, but no he is hungry right now and needs juice or something. (Shelly)

The interesting part of the next comment is the mother’s reasoning for getting up so early to exercise. She talks about doing it this way so “I don’t miss anything.” This shows not only a sacrifice of extra sleep or using other time to exercise but her feeling that she cannot miss time with her husband or daughter over time to herself.

[Referring to getting up in the morning to exercise before everyone else wakes up] My husband is still in bed; my daughter is still in bed. I come home and they are just getting up so it’s like I don’t miss anything, and I mean so it’s much easier I’ve found because if you try to do it after work like you said when you come home either I don’t feel like it; I don’t feel like leaving her; I don’t feel like leaving him... (FG1)

Another woman in a different focus group talked about missing out on exercise, something her husband gets to do, and something that used to be an important part of her life.

I find that I have sacrificed a lot, like my husband goes and plays ball and goes to work out and I don't. I was an athlete in college and it was hard for me to have the baby then do nothing. I feel like I have sacrificed a lot of myself and I wouldn't trade it for the world, but I think that is what mothers do – giving up you to raise a baby. (FG4)

As the above examples show, these women seem to struggle to find time for themselves.

Perhaps this is evidenced best by the following comment, "I think to myself, I can't even do the simplest things, because I feel like I've done nothing but I've had no time to myself" (FG2). The last mother's comment shows how even though she gave up an important activity for herself, she reframes this sacrifice in a positive way as she comments, "I wouldn't trade it for the world." This aspect of "maternal" sacrifice will be discussed in more detail in a later section.

There also appears to be a sacrifice of relationships both with spouses and with outside friendships. Terri comments, "It [being a mother] just dictates your friends." (Terri) The next comment regarding relationships shows the personal responsibility the mother takes for keeping up with her relationships. Similar to the mother who attributed her need for time alone to a personality trait, this mother attributed her lack of time with friends and husband because of her lack of time "to keep them all up."

You juggle so much and what normally gives is you. So maybe your relationship from friends, your husband, and other people suffer because you just don't have time to keep them all up. (FG4)

Brenda and Terri highlighted a sacrifice of time with husbands as well as outside friendships:

I guess you do kind of sacrifice your free time and that time with you and your husband. That time to be alone, it seems if we want any time alone it has to be at night after everybody is in bed or plan a date to do it. That is one thing I noticed. You feel like you are stretched thin....I think maybe you sacrifice a little bit in relationships. For me, I like to have that relationship with other women and other moms; just that social interaction and I think some of that you sacrifice. (Brenda)

[Talking about how her parents mentioned to her and her husband that they don't take care of themselves because they are so focused on their children.] You don't take care of yourself, not that I am falling apart. You need time for the two of you. You sacrifice a lot there... I am also concentrating so much energy on developing friends for my kids; sometimes my friendships are not being developed. Time, energy, you always think of them first. (Terri)

Sacrifices related to career

In addition to basic needs and personal needs, there is also evidence that many of the women have sacrificed either their entire career or certain aspects of a career, such as being promoted. One mother talked about how she had decided to do home daycare because it would be a way for her to bring in income while at the same time being able to stay home with her children. This same mother talked about feeling resentment towards her husband because they were in the same field and with her decision to stay home came the realization that her husband is moving on with his career and she is not.

I don't resent anything towards my kids because that was my choice, but sometimes I think I might resent my husband a little more because he is moving on with his job. I gave up my career to stay home and do daycare...I have a lot of resentment toward him because we have the same education and he is going places with his and mine is on hold. (FG4)

Other women also talked about giving up career related goals. The next woman talked about her career sacrifices in relation to her husband's but within the context that she felt it most logical for her to sacrifice her career.

I didn't want Payton to have to be raised by someone else. After seeing how much my husband's career has taken away from us and the family, it wouldn't have worked for both of us to do that. One of us has to sacrifice. So I felt it was better for me to decrease my hours and be home for the children. (FG2)

Other women talked about sacrifice of career aspirations as well. It is important to notice, however, that these comments were made within the context of conscious choices the women made. While it may very well be these "choices" were made based on deeply ingrained gender stereotypes or based on their gendered experiences of growing up, it appears that it is important to acknowledge that making the choices they have made was honoring what they believed to be best based on their current knowledge and awareness.

First, when I made a decision to have children, I made the decision that would be my career. So I decided to sacrifice the business world career. (Terri)

I've put everything on hold but I plan to go back to school...some people think I am crazy because I'm not going to college but that is just what I want to do. [stay home with her child] (FG2)

It [being a mother] took the wind out of my sails for my career. In that time I didn't care anymore to go after the big jobs or money anymore. I don't think it affected my husband. Someone has to pay the bills. (FG3)

As far as a go-getter, I still have to work and I do love my work. It didn't bother me if I got promoted or not it was fine. I'm not going to put in 80 hours a week to get promoted. (FG3)

But I don't really sit around and say; oh I have sacrificed this. I guess what I always wanted to be from the time I was little was a mom. I wanted to be able to stay at home. I have done both and trying to work full time, and that was just with the oldest daughter, but that was just huge to try to balance all that...(Brenda)

For some women, the choice to sacrifice in the career world was not so straightforward.

Whitney talked about her struggle of wanting to stay home yet wanting to have a job as well. Related to her current feelings during our interview and in the focus group, she took a very strong stance about the importance of one parent staying home with young children and seemed rather confident and satisfied about her decision to stay home. In fact, she was fairly critical of families where both parents worked to afford the more materialistic things in life. The following quotations highlight her struggle to feel comfortable in her decision as well as her current criticisms of parents who work for more material things.

It took me a long time. It wasn't right away. I was glad that I was home but there was still that part of me that wanted to have a job. We decided to have Lucy right away after I got my degree, so then I had two kids and there was no way, even if I wanted to work, we could afford daycare for two kids. It would be too much on a teacher's salary. So it was pointless, although I considered it just so I could work. It took me, I would say that maybe in the last year or two and I have been home since 1994, have I really started to feel sure this was the right decision. When we decided to have this baby, I was getting ready to go back to school and I told my husband, I am not going to want to work anymore with this one. It is not going to be any easier for me to put this one in daycare then it was to put Linda in daycare. So that was a decision I made, I had to give that up for another six years. (Whitney)

I think a lot of women, who say they wish they didn't have to work, aren't women who have to work in the first place. I think the women who have to work are single parents or really low-income moms. I lived in a trailer for seven years because I chose to stay home with my kids. That is a sacrifice that a lot of people aren't willing to do. I am not saying that everybody should make that choice, but I didn't have to work. I didn't have to drive a new car. I didn't have to have the best house. (Whitney)

Always putting others' needs first

The issue of sacrifice in these mothers' lives seems to be quite pervasive as they frequently mentioned how they put others' needs before their own, describing their needs as typically coming last – “so you put yourself last and take care of children and husband first and then your own needs.” (Shelly) In the first focus group after several women had mentioned the word sacrifice, they were asked to talk about sacrifices they make related to being mothers. One woman made this comment, which highlights how her needs typically come last:

Privacy, financial stuff, time, if anything gives it's always you; first the kids then the husband, no first the kids, house, then the husband and then it's like okay. (FG1)

All of the following comments illustrate how women's needs are often put last:

It's just this whole putting yourself out to all these people in all these different directions all day everyday and you just can't do it all no matter if you're working part time or full time or whatever. Everybody wants 100% of full time efforts from you all the time and you can't. Somebody has to sacrifice. (FG1)

I give time to my husband so he can go out and do what he wants to do and then there is no time left for yourself. (FG2)

Well, the kids always come first... You have their schedule, you have everybody else's schedule and then you schedule for yourself and by the time you get to yourself, there isn't any time left for yourself. (Rachel)

[My question to Holly was “When do your needs come in?”] Realistically they come probably it is Haley's needs and then the marriage needs and then my needs. Sometimes mine come before his and sometimes his come before mine. They [mine] are certainly at the bottom. (Holly)

Always putting others' needs before one's own likely has an effect on mothers' self-esteem. Feeling like you are always last likely causes one to question her self worth, which comes through in later sections of mothers' use of strong language and in looking at the overall value of mothering. MacRae (1998) highlighted the potential costs to an individual's sense of self that caregiving can have on a person, especially if the person feels that they are not living up to the highest standards of care giving. Her research was specifically related to caregivers of Alzheimer's patients; however, it seems

relevant related to mothers' experiences as well. Skaff and Pearlin (1992) also discussed how certain aspects of caregiving could lead to what they called loss or shrinkage of self. They attributed this in part to the loss of previous activities that a person engaged in before taking on a caregiving role. Again, their research was related to caregivers of Alzheimer's patients, which as pointed out, seems relevant to mothers' experiences too with the exception that Alzheimer's research takes into account the aspect of finality of life vs. the context of development and growth within which mothering occurs.

Mothers' definitions of "maternal" sacrifice

The final category apparent in women's discussions of "maternal" sacrifice was related to their reframing the concept of sacrifice. These women strongly held the belief that what they were doing for their children should not be seen so much as sacrifice, but rather as a trade-off or an exchange for deeper rewards and benefits not afforded by other positions in life. The first evidence of this was during the first focus group when the group was discussing the "constant sacrifices" they make. While one woman commented, "We all make sacrifices no matter if we're working or if we're home and it's we're sacrificing a lot of our time towards the children," others were quick to interject with the words, "but willingly," "yeah, and lovingly." In the second focus group a mother commented, "It is exhausting, but it is also the most wonderful thing that I've done." Other women shared this sentiment about the positive rewards of being a mother illustrated by the following comments:

I can't imagine not being a mom now. I can't remember what my life was like before even though it has only been 14 months. And I don't want to for good or bad. (FG4)

I think maternity is a sacrifice, pregnancy is a sacrifice, I don't know that having children and being a parent is though... It is not a sacrifice to have kids, there are people who can't have one and it is definitely a choice. If I weren't 37 years old, I'd probably have more. (Debra)

You think about that as a kid and you think time is going so slow. But now that I am an adult and I have kids and I think about our oldest daughter being six and I look back on those last six years and I can hardly remember because it has gone so fast. I feel like if it is a sacrifice, it is a short period in your life. Obviously there are days when I say, "Oh, what have I done",

but I guess I think it is more of a positive thing. I think you do sacrifice some things, maybe things of yourself, but I think you get them back in the hugs and mommy I love you and those kinds of things. (Brenda)

In the focus groups, women were much more likely to openly discuss the “sacrifices” they make related to being mothers. They were more likely to use the word, “sacrifice” in the focus groups. When asked directly to define sacrifice in the interviews, they each reframed it into a positive aspect of what they are getting back from mothering. This reframing also happened in the second focus group. One mother first used the word sacrifice and later in the discussion reframed this and talked about how she really would not choose the word sacrifice. Following is her reasoning for this:

I used the word sacrifice, but I don’t know that was the right word. A sacrifice is just adapting. You learn to change your life and your wants and needs and adapting to what they want and need. Yea, you sacrifice what you want so they can get new clothes for school and your clothes are 10 years old, but I don’t really know that it is a sacrifice. You are doing it for them. It makes me feel good to see them in new clothes...just the happiness on their face when they get a want or need fulfilled helps diminish my wants. You do give up a lot. (FG2)

While there does seem to be some apprehension here as her last six words were “you do give up a lot,” I also sensed from other comments in the focus groups that women were not really comfortable with using the word sacrifice to describe their experience of being mothers. To follow up on this, I asked women in the individual interviews to talk further about the sacrifices they make as mothers and I also asked them how they would define sacrifice related to motherhood. The following three quotations are representative examples of feedback received:

[How do you define sacrifice?] Something you are giving up is what I would normally say. You’re giving up your career, or you’re giving up on good finances, or giving up time that you could be spending on yourself. But, what are you gaining? That is the other side of what I am saying. Sometimes, you sacrifice for the better of something. So I sacrifice my career, but I am getting all the rewards of being a mom. So I sacrifice having money, but I have the joy of raising my two little children. So sacrifice is not always bad. (Terri)

Well, my first idea is giving things up, like giving up pop. It starts with pregnancy. I was more conscious about how much pop I was drinking, if I was eating vegetables well... So it kind of starts then, but it’s not a major sacrifice. It’s not hurting me to do that. A lot of time I think a sacrifice is a negative for you. You are giving up something that you really want to do or have. But even the bigger things like career, I am not always sure that is the best thing even. I know people who are so focused on career, they don’t have very good friendships or family because that is all they did. I don’t necessarily think that is the best life. I think that

even though I am giving things up on one hand, on the other hand I think it is good and maybe for the better, making me a better person. (Shelly)

The connotation I have when I think of is thinking of it as a bad thing, the word, so maybe that is why I don't think of it as that word. Giving up something that you don't want to give up is how I think of sacrifice. Definably the things I choose to give up, do I not want to give up? I don't know. In a different situation I wouldn't want to but in this situation it is ok...the path is greater than what you are giving up. (Holly)

Bearing the emotional "labor" of caring for children

Aspects of emotion work are evident throughout several of the other themes as well, however, this section is devoted to highlighting specific aspects of emotion work that women described in their daily experiences of mothering. Women typically described the emotional exhaustion of mothering to be much more than they anticipated. It was common to hear comments such as these:

The emotional exhaustion is tremendous. (Jodi)

There are times when I just feel I have been run ragged. You are just giving parts of yourself away constantly; everybody is asking for parts of you and the kids are asking for the biggest part. It is hard, I see this happen, when you are tired and you have just had it and they have been bickering and your temper gets short and it is so hard. That is where I see most of it [emotional exhaustion], when you are just drained. (Susan)

I need to sit down and pray basically so I can get myself back together because I mean when I'm losing it then the kids are losing it you know and when you are sitting there screaming at them that it is not going to work but still it is much more emotional...but I think it is just being a mother is just hard. (FG1)

You have exhaustion from work and then coming home and then you don't want to deal with things at home. When your emotions and patience get worn out someplace it ends up coming out on your kids. Because you are done, you have nothing left to be patient about. That is one level of wearing on your emotions. Another one is worrying whether or not they are turning out the way they ought to be. (Rachel)

There seemed to be four areas related to women's expressions of emotional exhaustion. The first is the day-to-day exhaustion felt from tending to children's needs, such as figuring out how to discipline or how to have patience even when you have been up all night with a crying child. The second area is related to the emotional work involved with knowing if you are making the right and "best" decisions related to how you care for your children. The third area is related to the emotional

exhaustion experienced from feeling full responsibility for child rearing. The fourth area consists of mothers' responses to the emotional work of raising children.

Experiences of day-to-day exhaustion

Related to day-to-day parenting experiences, it is evident in the following passages that there is a tremendous amount emotion work involved in daily caregiving. One of the first questions asked in the focus group was "What is it like to be a mom?" Women chose words such as intense, diverse, challenging, exhausting, exhilarating, and indescribable just to name a few. Whether these words had positive or negative connotations, they all elicited highly emotional reactions. In the first focus group one woman commented

It is more of a full-time job than I thought it would be. It is more emotionally exhausting than I thought it would be. You know you don't realize how when you say the same thing over and over again they just don't listen to you. It's just like sometimes I get beyond anger. I'm just like I can't do this anymore. It's one of those days where you know it's just like I don't understand why they won't listen to me. (FG1)

Shelly talked about the emotional exhaustion involved with daily tasks such as doing the laundry or trying to leave the house on time. In the first part of the next passage she referred to how her son got his shirt all messy just as they were ready to walk out the door. She said

It was pretty bad so I cleaned it up as best I could and it was emotionally exhausting to me because you think you are ready to go and then you have a big mess and have to stop and clean it up and that takes 10 minutes and then something else happens and suddenly you are 30 minutes late. It goes back to that feeling that you have to get things done in a certain amount of time and that time is money and productivity and all that... I think a lot of my emotional exhaustion is when I feel frustrated when I am trying to do something and he messes it all up, like walking through the laundry after I have folded it, that kind of thing. (Shelly)

Another mother talked about the emotional exhaustion of staying up all night with a newborn and not really knowing what to do. However, in this passage she pointed out that even though it is exhausting, it is also "wonderful."

You know when it is 2 o'clock in the morning and he is screaming and we are just standing there going he's had a diaper change, he's been fed, why, why is he doing this right now. It's just having someone else to look after. The hours in your day just fly by... He goes to bed and

you wonder what you've done with your day... It is exhausting, but it is also the most wonderful thing that I've done. (FG2)

Other sources of daily exhaustion are evident in the following passages:

One issue is the physical tiredness. This is an emotional drain. You feel burnt out. I can think of a lot of words that describe how I feel at night. When the kids go to bed, it is ahhhhh –just let me rest. But emotionally, I think you are being challenged all the time. They are always asking you questions you don't know the answers to and that is very frustrating. It is also emotionally exhausting because sometimes you find you are repeating yourself over and over and over. And you wonder what you are doing wrong that it is not sinking in. You are always questioning yourself. (Terri)

[Emotional exhaustion from the need to always be aware.] Every time I walk into a room or wherever Haley is I sort of immediately case the joint and look for, one, breakables, things that she could get into and just stairs and stuff. (Holly)

[Talk about emotional exhaustion you feel as a mother.] Just doing everyday stuff, trying to keep up with the house and the kids and laundry. (Brenda)

You just do what you have to do. I can remember nights when Kathleen was sick and she could hardly breathe and she had to be kept upright. So I take her into our bed, prop my pillows up and sleeping like this, laying her on my chest so she could be upright...and then getting up and going to work. (Susan)

Making the right decisions

The second area of emotional exhaustion for mothers was centered on their feelings of whether or not they are making the right decisions for how to care for their children. Along with this desire to “do the right thing” came tremendous feelings of guilt evident through comments such as “I think guilt is my middle name. It is every mother's middle name” (Terri) and “You name it, I feel guilty about it” (Whitney). Baines et al. (1991) found that women often feel their need to express their own individuality and the right to exercise choices in their lives are limited based on ingrained beliefs that it is a woman's “duty to care.” One way this area of emotional exhaustion is expressed is through the women's use of the word worry, which is noticeable in the following passages:

You just worry so much about everything you do and it starts from the time you are pregnant. You know – should I eat this. Is this okay for the baby and it just keeps going. You know, I told her she was a spoiled brat. Is that going to like warp her mind? (FG1)

When I got pregnant with Alan, it was worry, worry, WORRY! It starts from the minute you conceive them. I think that is what it means to be a mother. You worry... (Terri)

I guess my thing is the constant worry. I think it is partly personality. I don't know how many mothers really worry, but... (Debra)

Evident in the last comment was the woman's tendency to blame her worrying on her personality.

This woman questioned how many other mothers really worry. Based on interviews with other mothers in the study, it seemed to be quite pervasive. Several other women contributed this worrying to their personalities rather than a common aspect of mothering.

The next passage shows an example of how Jodi talked about the emotional exhaustion of feeling bad for wanting to do something for herself and yet worrying if letting her daughter watch a television program in the other room was wrong, despite the fact that she had spent most of the afternoon with her daughter at the clinic and the library.

Yes, and you know one of things, like the emotional exhaustion like you were talking about, the emotional exhaustion for me is like yesterday I came home and I wanted to watch Oprah but I also knew I had been with Teagan from 2:15 to 3:45 at the doctor's office getting her exam and I had gone to the library before that to get her some books. I rented this movie that I knew she would like and so I brought that home and got the movie ready for her and got her going and then I came out to the living room to watch Oprah and the whole time I was sitting there feeling like that isn't the right thing to do, I should be with her the whole time. (Jodi)

The next passage shows another example of maternal guilt. Terri talked about feeling guilty over not "being there" for her child because the child was in the care of someone else.

When Shelby was in daycare it was very hard for me and there was a guilt issue there too. One time they called me because she fell in the crib and got a big bruise and I felt like I should have been there. The point is I wasn't in control. I wasn't there for her. (Terri)

I found this final passage to be quite moving. Holly's sincere struggle with "wanting to be the best" was intensified by her belief that she does not even know the best. It is important to find ways to help parents develop confidence in their own abilities without prescribing only one "correct" way to care for children, which then leads to the feeling of failure because not everyone parents the same way and cannot possibly live up to one single standard. For Holly, emotional exhaustion comes from trying so hard.

My most common experience [of emotional exhaustion] is that I have it in my head that there is an ideal situation and I know actually there is probably not... My biggest emotional exhaustion is always doubting whether I should be spending more time at home with Haley and the amount of time she is in daycare, is it good for her? All those things I am constantly second guessing that....I guess just wanting to do the best and first you have to know and I don't even know the best. (Holly)

Feeling full responsibility

The third area of emotional exhaustion came from feelings of full responsibility for the children, whether it was related to daily caregiving or how the children turned out as adults. Accounts in this area were centered on a general feeling of responsibility as well as a feeling of responsibility discussed in relation to their husbands' level of responsibility. General feelings of responsibility were expressed through comments such as, "I have someone that I am responsible for 100%," (FG2) or "I am responsible for you and how exciting and scary and rewarding all at the same time. It can overcome me at times" (FG4). The woman in the following passage speaks to the feeling of full responsibility through her reference to the "supermom" stereotype:

There is this whole concept I think of the supermom, superwoman, you can do it all and I've just reached my limits. [Someone interjects.] It stresses you out. [The first woman continues.] This semester, no I can't do it all. I'm going to have to start saying that. [Someone interjects.] And that's hard for some people to do to just say no [Another interjection.] You feel like a failure, if you say no I can't do this, it's too much for me. That's what society wants us to do. (FG1)

In looking at families and the division of domestic labor, Demo and Acock (1993) found that it is very common for women to downplay the amount of family work they do. DeVault (1991) also found it common for women to downplay the actual amount of family work they do. The next few passages describe women's feelings of responsibility and exhaustion based on their husbands' lack of responsibility. However, the women do not frame it as a lack of responsibility on the husbands' part. Instead they talk about their own feelings of guilt for wanting their husbands to take on more responsibility.

I think mothers struggle with the feeling that they are always on call. [She offers an example from her own situation with her husband.] Jay is not a babysitter; he is a parent. But on the weekend, my job doesn't stop. My job goes from when they wake up till they go to bed. His

job stops when he gets home. But when he comes home, I don't really feel like, okay now they are yours. We are very much a team. He will give baths, but this morning I gave him a hard time and I was trying to get the kids all together at the same time and get Shelby to kindergarten and pick up a little friend on the way. I told Jay I needed him to wake up at 6:30 in the morning instead of 7:00. He said okay. It was like I need your help. (Terri)

While Terri talked about needing help for basic day-to-day caregiving tasks such as getting baths and getting children ready in the morning, in the next passage, Whitney talked about the need for her husband to be more involved with "the big stresses" such as discipline. She said

Scott just totally trusts me and he totally, how I handle it is the way he is going to handle it. I don't know why he does it that way, but he watches how I handle it and then he does the same thing because he apparently thinks I know everything. I don't always know what to do and I have told him, what shall we do, and he will say I think you are handling it fine. I always feel like that burden is on me too, the big stresses. It's not that he is not involved, but he is always following my lead and that is really exhausting for me because I feel that much more responsible. If we were talking about it and making a plan together, it would be so much easier because then if it failed, we could say okay, we screwed up, but the way it is, it is "I screwed up." (Whitney)

Lamb (1995) talks about three components of father involvement: engagement or interaction (actual one-on-one time with child); parental accessibility (being available to child while doing something else, such as being in the same room); and responsibility (more than just helping out, such as knowing about children's clothing needs, purchasing clothes, and deciding what child wears or being responsible for making child care arrangements). While fathers typically fare well in the first two areas, Lamb writes, "The largest discrepancy between paternal and maternal involvement is in the area of responsibility" (p. 25). Diane Ehrensaft (1995) calls this the "psychological management" of parenting and found that mothers are much more involved in this aspect of parenting, not only being in charge of child care or keeping track of doctor's appointments and sporting events, but also through general thinking about their children. She found that mothers were much more likely to think of their children while separated and to worry about the child's well being. This is shown several times in this study, for example in the above comment as Wendy talked about her desire for her husband to take more responsibility in the discipline area or in a later section as Terri talked about wanting her husband to take responsibility for choosing what their child would wear or knowing

where to find his pajamas and also through mothers' discussions of the worry they experience related to mothering. This is also highlighted in the next passage as Susan talked about the tremendous pressure she feels just "trying to be everything" and feeling responsible for everything. She also shows that she is sympathetic towards her husband's long hours at work and struggles to feel confident that she shouldn't feel guilty about wanting more help from him. She said

Trying to be everything. Trying to be the wife, the sister, the friend, and for me working, just trying to do everything. You feel responsible for everything in the house. I know my husband works long hours, so I am caught in that catch twenty-two of wanting him to do more but feeling guilty for asking him to do more. And then telling myself why should you feel guilty, you worked all day and you are dealing with the kids. It's not like you have been lazing about at a pool. (Susan)

According to Baines et al. (1991) when men provide care there is really not a prescribed type of "responsibility" for the person they are caring for, as there seems to be for mothers. The authors wrote

There is no paternal equivalent to the concept of 'maternal' bonding that has fueled the ideology of motherhood, helping to equate 'bad' children and disadvantaged environment with maternal deprivation (p. 22).

Thus as true in this study, these authors point out that mothers are typically expected to carry a different level of responsibility in caring for children. Ferguson (1991) also points out the lack of emphasis on fathers. She discussed that while the child development literature emphasizes the importance of the mother-child relationship, there are no such prescriptions for paternal bonding. She wrote, "a different form of caring is expected from fathers than mothers" (p. 85).

Responses to the emotional work

The final area of emotional exhaustion was related to general feelings about dealing with the emotional work of being a mother and with the exhaustion from trying to suppress your own emotions for the sake of others, primarily the children. First examples are given of how mothers talked about having to put others' emotions first. This is highlighted in the following quotations:

....it just takes a lot of emotions. I get sad, I get happy, I get angry. I think the people you love the most affect you emotionally the most... You take a lot to heart, you are not only responsible for your own emotions, you are now responsible for (in my case) two other peoples' emotions. (Terri)

Like the emotions...you put yours away so you can deal with theirs. (Rachel)

When they are upset you can be upset too, but you need to comfort them before you can comfort yourself. Even though maybe it should be the other way around, you should be comforted so then you can comfort them, but it doesn't work that way. (Rachel)

[When asked to talk about times she experiences emotional exhaustion...] Any time I have time pressure. I think that what leads to the exhaustion is that I try hard not to let my stress effect her or my interaction with her. Just the effort of trying not to... (for example) I try not to rush her because I'm in a rush. Suppressing that is exhausting. (Holly)

In their study, Baines et al. (1991) described one aspect of caring as the day-to-day work of managing the household and the "invisible emotional work of identifying and anticipating the needs of others" (p. 30). MacRae (1998) also highlighted the stresses faced by caregivers when trying to manage one's own emotions while at the same time dealing with another's inability to control his or her emotions.

The final passages in this area are related primarily to how women expressed their feelings about the emotional exhaustion they face. Common expressions were that they feel frustrated and angry.

I think part of it is that I have an idea that I need to get this done and that is not a good thing when you are putting other people's wishes before yours. You don't ever get to your things to get done so I try to change the way I think about things. It's just frustrating when you can't get to your things. (FG2)

There are times I wonder why I let myself have to do all this. Is it because I have just taken this over, but yet I wonder if I don't do it, is it going to get done? (Susan)

[I asked Rachel, "When are times you are able to put your needs before others?"] When I am to the point of breaking. Then it is okay because something needs to be done. This is mommy time I am out the door...I get angry and then I finally demand some time and then the time just sort of gets taken away again. And then you reach the point again where you have had it and you say I need time and you schedule something for you (whatever time is left) and that slowly gets taken away also. (Rachel)

The next dialogue is especially poignant because of the woman's choice of the words, "You don't feel as though they see you as important as a human." This is a very strong statement to make and one that really speaks to the extreme emotional exhaustion faced by many mothers and what that

exhaustion means to their feelings of self. This dialogue was prompted when I said, “You have all talked a lot about various sacrifices you make. Now talk about how you feel about making those sacrifices.” The following dialogue took place:

Sometimes you get frustrated. [Someone interjects.] Frustrated was the word I would use. [Another interjection.] And angry, you don’t feel as though they see you as important as a human. (FG2)

The last quotation highlights the general toll that emotion work of caregiving takes on those caring for children.

I am okay with a lot of it, but I do struggle here and there with myself. I get tired and emotionally tired too. Sometimes I just ask if I can have a little time away from the kids for a while. (Terri)

Pressures/expectations of mothering

There were several areas of pressure and expectations women described related to their experiences as mothers. Women definitely felt that there are “unspoken” rules about how a mother should be evident by the following comment from Jodi during her individual interview – “There are pressures and expectations of what you are supposed to be like as a mother.” (Jodi) Women talked about several outside influences that impact their mothering experiences. These outside influences included spouses, other mothers and friends, relatives, doctors/nurses, co-workers, TV/media, church, and pressures from within themselves (although likely these originated from cultural and societal messages). Sources of outside influences, while at times providing support to the mothers, most often were described as causing tremendous pressures and expectations, which in turn caused feelings of guilt, self-doubt, and self-imposed pressures and expectations. The following dialogue among women in the first focus group is a great example of how mothers described their experiences of pressure and expectations in their lives:

There’s just pressure and then other people expect things from you and expect you...
[Someone interjects.]
And I think husbands expect things... [Interjection]
Everybody expects you to be perfect... [Interjection]
And I expect myself to be perfect... [Lots of interjections and agreement]

Yeah, so do I. (FG1)

The area of pressures and expectations was one of the largest themes that emerged from this research in terms of data. It seemed that trying to understand the various pressures and how to balance those with personal expectations and desires was a primary source of stress in these women's lives.

The following two passages highlight the tension these women feel in this area:

Like she said, no matter what you do there are people who would say this is great and you are doing everything right and then the exact opposite for everything. I don't know how you can know what to do and not to do. (FG2)

I think we often judge things we don't understand. I often think we put expectations on people that we don't understand. I think it comes down to what I said, "Until you are a mother, you don't understand the pressures involved and all of what goes with it". (Terri)

The areas most relevant to this theme emerged under the following categories: (a) advice mothers receive; (b) familial influences; (c) societal influences; (d) pressures specific to stay-home mothers; and (e) mothers' beliefs that much of these pressures are self-imposed.

Advice mothers receive

Women talked about the constant advice they receive from the moment others know they are pregnant. Frequently this is unsolicited advice. One mother commented, "For me I found that I was bombarded with advice, more than I needed in all different categories" (FG1). She chose to use the word "bombarded" which is a fairly strong word. It also seems that mothers realize that at any time they may be subjected to unsolicited advice. Another mother talked about how her mother has been pretty good about not giving unwanted advice, however, she pointed out that this may change. She said, "...but things may change here in two weeks because we are going on vacation with them [my parents] for a whole week. I may get pointed advice shoved at me" (FG2). This mother shows a strong choice of words as well through use of the word "shoved."

While there were several areas of childrearing that women discussed as bringing about unsolicited advice, from pregnancy, discipline, educational needs, to general parenting topics, there were some specific topics that emerged over and over. The areas in which mothers seemed to get

“pointed advice” are related to (a) breastfeeding, (b) employment status, and (c) number or gender of children they should have or want. The following comments highlight each of these areas.

Related to breastfeeding. Related to breastfeeding, some women received overwhelming pressure to breastfeed, while others received pressure not to. Evident in the first passage is the unwritten rules about how long a mother should breastfeed her child:

People that I know who are professionals were like well you’re certainly going to breastfeed aren’t you and I wasn’t really sure I wanted to breastfeed. I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I ended up breastfeeding the baby for about two years and then it was like okay now you’ve taken this a little too far. (FG1)

I got kind of the opposite thing when I nursed because I came from an environment – I have older, most of my sisters are like nine years older or more and none of them nursed...so when I started nursing, even at my parents, my own parent’s house you know, everyone’s like don’t you ever give the baby a bottle... (FG1)

One mother talked about the message she received from her grandmother, which made her question her decision to breastfeed.

I remember my oldest sister telling me when I was pregnant with my oldest daughter she said you would get all kinds of advice from everybody. Lots of times you get it from people you don’t even know but just take it all in and decide what you can keep and like. I remember with my grandma who gave me all this advice, I was nursing my baby and she was telling me about how chubby babies were healthy babies [and my baby was not chubby] and so she was concerned about her getting enough. (FG3)

Related to employment status. The next area of advice and pressure women received was related to their career decisions. Sometimes women were questioned about their choices to stay home or work part time rather than focusing on their careers. For Brenda, who wanted to stay home but couldn’t at the time because of financial constraints, she received the message that if she really, truly wanted to stay home she would find a way.

I can remember feeling that way, and I didn’t want to work, I had to because of finances. It was interesting because people would say, “It would seem there should be some way you could stay home.” So you really feel like you are a terrible mother, like you are not doing something you should be doing. I just think there are enough other struggles with being a new parent without feeling like you have to please everybody. (Brenda)

Mothers from the academic community talked about pressure from professors to pursue a more rigorous "academic" lifestyle and not feeling supported when they chose otherwise.

I think that children have influenced my career. When I was finishing up my Master's degree, my professor really frowned upon my choice because I chose a position in child care. I don't know exactly her reasoning but I was just set that was the route we wanted to take. [She later adds that she felt her professor thought that being a mother shouldn't change one's career plans.] (FG2)

For the next mother as well, she received negative feedback from colleagues in the academic community related to her choices about not pursuing her research career at this time. She said

Biological science is really dominated by men and so you just go and do all this stuff and you make your life decisions on what is best for your career and after Haley was born, I remember two weeks before she was born I thought I would be moving on with the guy I would be working with next and then less than a week after she was born I thought we needed to stay around here and everybody's looking at me like it's so sad, but I don't care. I can't articulate it to them. They can't possibly understand. (FG3)

Women also talked about feeling pressure from colleagues if they worked part time, took time off for a sick child, or didn't do as much schoolwork. Sometimes they felt that others thought they were not "pulling their weight."

Even I work part time and I feel guilty. The first whole year I worked part time I felt guilty. Every time I left the office because people would go, "Oh, you get to leave now. What are you going to do all afternoon?" And I had made it clear that people could call me at home if there was problems and I would have people call me, "Oh did I wake you up?" I'm like, "Wake me up. Come on. My daughter is down and I'm scrubbing the floor and trying to do something;" and people are like, "What do you do all afternoon while she's sleeping?" ... I got constantly, "Wow it would be so nice to leave at only part time." And I just say, "I get paid part time you understand that too." (FG1)

[This is related to whether to give her child a flu shot. She did because she didn't want to have to miss work if her daughter got sick.] Then I talked to Dr. Galen about it and she gave me information about it. But Mike and I kind of agreed to do that, and this is how it affects my mothering because if Teagan gets sick then I have to miss work. And the peer pressure of, okay I have to call in for a week maybe if she is sick. If I would have to call in for a week, the pressure of what I would hear from my peers saying, "Now I have to take her workload." (Jodi)

When you work and have kids, you do almost feel like you know if you have to leave early for something you know... people are like oh she's leaving early again, that's kind of so you wonder what your coworkers are thinking and they think that you are slacking off. (FG1)

In the next quotation, Shelly prefaced her comment with saying she doesn't feel a whole lot of pressure, when in fact she described quite a lot of pressure here and throughout her interview.

I don't feel a whole lot of pressure. There is some form of pressure from professors in my department and from the professional side of it. And sometimes other classmates make comments that imply that you should be doing those things and it is hard for me to do, as a mother, to do those things like work on this wonderful thesis so I can get published things like that. (Shelly)

Related to "appropriate" number and gender of children. The last area of "advice" relates to either how many children people choose to have or the pressures to have the "perfect" combination of sexes (i.e. a boy and a girl). The first passage is interesting because this mother has had several problems maintaining a full-term pregnancy. She shared with the group that she had several miscarriages and right now would really like to have another child. In her comment though she made the statement that if she and her husband had given it more thought maybe they wouldn't have had even one. It seems that she feels some pressure that "having children" is just part of what you do as an adult and now realizing that more and more people are choosing not having children as an acceptable choice.

That was my choice [to have a child], but now there are a lot of people and [not having kids] is their choice. When I was growing up, that was the thing to have children. If we would have taken more time to think about it maybe we wouldn't have had one. (FG4)

The next two comments however show the societal pressure to have children, yet only your "fair share."

You know if you don't have children some people say you're kind of scorned and if you have more than your fair share whatever that is... (FG1)

From the university perspective, being a professor. It's like when you have that first kid it's like, "That's okay you can have more." The second baby is like, "You are really pushing it;" and the third kid is like, "You know you are not serious." (FG1)

The following comments follow one woman's sharing about the negative comments she received while pregnant with her third child. This mother said people were pretty direct with questions about

why she would want a third child when she already has a boy and a girl. Other women in the group added their experiences related to that as well.

There's a lot of pressure like you said you know when you have a boy and a girl and there's the pressure when you have two girls to try for another one. (FG1)

[This comment from a woman who is expecting and already has a girl.] I constantly get, "Oh so you guys are hoping for a boy." (FG1)

Familial influences

The next area of pressures and expectations mothers face is related to influences from their families, including their parents, siblings, in-laws, and spouses. Pressure from their families comes from the models women saw as they were growing up. One mother talked about what her own mother was like. "It is what you would picture in your mind a mom would be and that was her." (FG2) Terri shared that her sister-in-law has always been the model she tries to follow, which she says is hard because they have two totally different styles of parenting. Rather than seeing their styles as just different, she holds her sister-in-law up as the ideal. When I asked her why she does this, she replied

Because I have heard it for years. They've been married for over 20 years. That's what I grew up with. I've been watching them all these years and this is what I thought a good mother was. (Terri)

The next passage highlights not only how Whitney feels pressure from the example her sister sets but also pressure because she is choosing to discipline differently than her parents.

Discipline is a lot different now than when we were kids and I think that I didn't feel like I had that kind of model to fall back on. Whereas in a lot of other ways you do, you can look at how your parents did things. But with discipline I didn't necessarily want to do things the way my parents and that generation did. [Continues to talk about how her mother feels threatened by this.] I think my mom's opinion just matters that much to me. The fact that she felt threatened made me question myself because my older sister does things a lot like my parents did so she has the oldest grandchild and is doing everything the way that our parents had done it and then here I am doing things differently. I just think that was really threatening to them. (Whitney)

There were several times women talked about messages they receive from their families related to their children's behavior and subsequent discipline. In the first passage, the mother acknowledges the amount of pressure she felt to have her child evaluated for attention-deficit

disorder. The second and third passages show situations in which the mothers felt pressure because of the way they chose to discipline their children.

With the boy thing, I have the proverbial boy. And we are talking about pressure, like what is he supposed to behave like and can he please be high energy rather than hyperactive. I mean he just gets up in the morning with springs in his butt and he's gone and I find that very enjoyable, but the in-laws and you can just see people going, "Do something with him." So I had him evaluated – is he attention deficit disorder and that was really bending to pressure and no he's not. (FG1)

She [my mother] thinks I'm so hard on my kids, but she was with us. So that was hard for me [talking about a recent time when her mom expressed disapproval of her style of discipline.] ...but I know she was not feeling well but it was interesting too... I modeled myself after her and she is not happy with me. (FG3)

[Discussing a situation in which Brenda thought her father-in-law disapproved of her discipline with her children.] ...and I was telling my mother-in-law that and she said, "Oh, I'm sure that wouldn't bother him" kind of implying that we weren't strict enough. I think with discipline I question myself a lot. That is an area I struggle with. (Brenda)

There were other examples of familial pressures and expectations, too numerous to highlight all. These examples ranged from one woman talking about the pressure she felt from both her husband and his mother to get pregnant to another talking about how angry her mother-in-law would be if she came to visit and the mom wouldn't wake her child from a nap. As one might guess, there were numerous references to maternal influences such as, "Well, my mom lives four miles away so she is right here. Sometimes it's good and sometimes it is bad" (FG2); and "She [my mom] is right there telling me all the time what to do and stuff" (FG4). This last passage is worthy of inclusion as it shows what must be a tremendous pressure for Debra to feel related to how her parents are judging her decisions. She said

Just like the little things my parents say. Like my dad, when I got pregnant with the first child, said, "Well you can take a couple years off and then go back to work," and I said, "If I take a couple years off, there will be no job to go back to. You can't just take a couple years off, plus I am the one that supports the family." Or my mother making comments like, "I am sure people wonder why your husband is not out working full time." And I say, "Who is going to take care of the kids. You mom, pushed me to get an education, which I wanted, and you supported my choice to get an education, now what do you want me to do with my kids?"... And they also feel there is something weird that my husband isn't working full time. But if we were both working full time they would probably criticize that the kids were in day care. And if I stayed home full time, it would be, "I wasted my education." No matter what

you do there is someone who disagrees. I don't know what the answer is and I just pray that it will be different for my daughter. (Debra)

Societal influences

Another area of pressure comes from society, both at an individual level, such as from friends or religious groups, as well as at a more general level through government and work policies, etc. The first quotation highlights an example of pressure women feel from some friendships and the second illustrates how women feel pressure from religious groups. The first woman talked about a friend she had who was constantly comparing their children and who also seemed to have a negative attitude about male children, which is what this mother had. She finally decided to end the relationship. She says, "I just decided it is too much pressure so I chose to no longer be in that relationship with her" (FG4). The next quotation shows how Shelly feels pressure from her church related to her parenting. She said

Another area of pressure, not really big, but I would say I get some from church. People expect you to raise your child a certain way, you should discipline and not let him do certain things. So I feel some kind of pressure there. It is probably a self-imposed kind because nobody has said to us you should let Matthew do that or you should be teaching him to do this. Nobody has said this to us. I just feel that is the expectation. (Shelly)

There seems to be a sense of pressure women feel because of the increase in parenting literature and what others have termed the "professionalization of motherhood." This is evident through women's reference to feeling the need to read all the books and at times feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information available. This is highlighted in the following comments:

I think that as many books as there are out there on parenting, what you should or shouldn't do. I think that everybody has their own way of doing things. You can't expect to be like someone else. (FG2)

I think that would benefit especially new moms because I think being a new mom is so overwhelming to start with. I don't know how other people do it, but I relied so much on books. This book said I need to do it this way and I took it very seriously and by the time I had my second one I had more confidence in how I did things. I knew what worked for me. (Whitney)

I don't have anything to base it on from my own experience because now there is more reading books and things like that. (Jodi)

Woollett and Phoenix (1991) point out that while on one hand psychology shows women's ability to mother as instinctually based at the same time develops rigid guidelines about how to be a good mother. They write

They [books] explicitly encourage women to distrust their own expertise or that of their family and friends (sometimes referred to as old wives' tales) and to seek instead advice and expertise from the medical professionals (pp. 43-44).

The following comments highlight other examples of pressure and expectations women receive from the media about how to mother. These sources of media include television, radio, and magazines.

Because there is just that feeling in society that you should do more. If you are home, it is supposed to be like Donna Reed. Well you know, Donna Reed was a TV show, and I think that is what aggravates me. It is the older congressmen that say let's go back to when mothers stayed home and I think, you weren't the mother, you didn't have the real grip on it. (Susan)

And maybe through commercialism, all these perfect families, that is all you ever see. You really don't know what goes on behind the doors of someone's house. You think their house is okay, so you don't want them thinking yours isn't. So I think it is a feeling of guilt, of failure that you don't want someone else to know that it is not okay right now. (Rachel)

[This discussion starts with a woman talking about pressure to put her child in daycare rather than for her to stay home with the child. Another supports her and says she feels that pressure as well.] That's right! My sister-in-law is like that. They both work from 7-5 at night. I can see where they would say to other people to put their kids in daycare because that is where their kids are... [Interjection] They just had an announcement on the radio or TV about child care and how that is a good thing to have your children in daycare [Interjection] Yeah, I saw that on TV. [Final interjection] No matter what you do someone else will tell you that you should be doing something else. (FG2)

There are messages from society in general that women discussed related to their experiences as mothers. These are illustrated in the following passages:

Society gives you so many mixed messages. Mixed feelings. One person's like well why aren't you using your education, why are you staying at home with your kids and then the next person why aren't you staying home with your kids. I mean you can't win. (FG1)

This next passage really shows in a broad way the societal pressure women feel in their roles as mothers. Even though Whitney said she doesn't like to blame things on society, what she is

essentially saying is related to the societal and cultural pressure mothers in our society feel. She first talked about how she feels that as mothers we question every choice we make. I asked her, "What is making us question every choice we make. What messages are we receiving that cause us to do that?"

She replied

I think just society in general. If you are not a member of the PTA, then you are not involved enough. If you say no, I can't help out with that this time, then you're not involved enough, you feel bad because you feel you should have been able to help out...I really don't know. I would like to say it is some big outside thing, but I think moms do it to themselves as much as anything. We want our kids to turn out great; we want them to have everything and that is a lot of pressure. I don't like to blame things on society because society is different with every generation and there is always something. I have said this to my husband different times like when his parents are coming to visit and I'll say, "Oh, we have to clean the house." And he says, "Oh they don't care." I say, "I know, but it doesn't reflect on you, it reflects on me." They don't think when they walk in the door, "Boy, Scott is a terrible housekeeper." If the kids are acting up, not just his parents, but other people, they won't think they must not have very good fathering. I think that is a problem. (Whitney)

Pressures specific to stay-home mothers

The next significant area in which women discussed feeling a lot of pressure and expectations was related to what a "stay-home" mom is expected to do. There seemed to be a general consensus from both women who were staying home as well as those who were employed that there is a lot of pressure on women who stay home to maintain all of the domestic duties, from caring for the children to cleaning the house to paying the bills. While one mother talked about enjoying this role, women were more likely to express dissatisfaction with this expectation. They felt that even though they were at home all day, childcare was a big enough responsibility without additional expectations for housework and such. These feelings are illustrated in the following quotations:

You are expected to never lose your cool, which I do. That's where the guilt comes in, because you don't meet your expectations. You always expect to sit down and work with your kids. I don't always do that. You are expected as a stay-home mother to do everything. All the bills, all the cleaning, when kids are sick to be the nurse. You have so many hats on that sometimes one of the hats falls off. (Terri)

It is a challenge when you work full time but then I don't know if I could be a stay-home mom because there is so much you have to do. Having one you have to entertain and do for them. Where we are in the world, like all these things a mother has to do like read to them in the womb or when they get out, read to them. There was all this pressure. I remember three

weeks into it calling my employer and said I want to come back because I didn't know how to be a mother. (FG4)

The next passage is a dialogue between women in the first focus group. It begins with a mom who stays home saying how she doesn't know how women who work outside of the home full time manage to get everything done. A mother who is employed full time says that she just lets things go more and her expectations are not as high. She adds that she believes stay-home moms are faced with additional pressures of "domesticity." Following is this dialogue:

[This first woman is the one who is employed full time responding to the mother who stays home.] You just put up with more, you just accept you know okay there's going to be a certain amount of clutter... But that goes back to the pressure of being a full-time mom. [Lots of agreement within the group – people comment "absolutely." Someone adds...] If you're a full-time mom everyone expects your house to be... "You're home all day what are you doing all day."
I've had people say that – "Well what do you do all day."
And sometimes I can't even pinpoint what I did all day.
Watch the kids.
It's something.
I picked up and the house is still looking like a mess.
I changed diapers... (FG1)

There seems to be a certain level of pressure from husbands if the mother stays home, such as to have the house cleaned and dinner ready when the husband comes home. Some pressures women face from their husbands are highlighted in the following passages:

I think that is my own fault because the kids want to do all these things and I've scheduled them in all these things. Each summer I say this will be the summer we do nothing and then extra things come up. But he [her husband] still expects, like I have to do the dinner by myself. Even though you are home, you are expected to do more than when you are working. (FG2)

I put a lot of pressure on myself to always have it together, to always have the house nice so when my husband comes home... (FG1)

[Holly talks about how she would possibly like to stay home.] We talked about it. I told him that I may stay home but I don't want it to be a situation that just because I'm home all the household responsibilities are on me. I don't think that is right. He disagreed with me then, but I'm sure there will be some issues to work out. (Holly)

Beliefs that pressures/expectations are self-imposed

The last area related to pressure and expectations shows how these women really believe that a lot of the pressures and expectations they feel are self-imposed. They had a rather difficult time pinpointing what messages they receive and from where. This could point to the fact that it is often difficult to realize how the messages we receive from the time we are children really become internalized. Debra pointed this out as well. She said

I think it is more social than genetic or biological. I don't think you can realize how strong the social influence [inaudible here] ...and how other situations and families that are held up as models can affect you. (Debra)

In this area there are two specific sub-categories. The first includes examples of women talking about how they are always questioning the choices they make as mothers and doubting themselves. The second category includes examples of passages where women specifically refer to the pressures and expectations they face as "self-imposed."

Always questioning and doubting yourself. Related to the first category, the following quotations illustrate the questioning and self-doubt many of these women experience:

You hear conflicting things and you start second-guessing yourself and I think that is a pressure. (Terri)

I think that because there is so much information out there, especially now, more so than like when we were kids, there is so much more out there and it is focused on safety and I think we just focus on our kids a lot more that our parents did. I think it almost makes us paranoid, knowing that there is this information so you feel obligated to use it and you feel like you are not being a good parent if you don't read the book, if you don't know the latest thing. I think that is a good thing because I think it is a good thing for parents to know, but I also think just having all that information out there and the focus on blaming parents if the kids go wrong, if your sixteen-year-old does something, they don't hold the kid accountable, they hold the parents accountable. I think that stress right there makes parents automatically go to a professional instead of using their own judgment because they are just not sure of it. (Brenda)

I think women now days since we do have choices, we are constantly questioning the choices we make and wondering is it best for us to work, is it best for us not to. [Someone interjects.] And society questions everything. [Another interjection.] Yeah and whether I'm working they're going to question me there, if I'm not working they're going to question me there and you don't win so finally you say I don't care what anyone else thinks. (FG1)

There seemed to be a fair amount of questioning and self-doubt related to specific aspects of caring for children. For example, in the next passage Jodi worries about her child watching too much television. In the passage after that Susan worries if she has been “doing what you should be doing.”

Yes and they say now that anybody under two shouldn't watch TV. Teagan watched TV under two and I am sure that is not going to affect her. That is another pressure. You think, oh my God, if I didn't do this for my child at this age, what is going to happen to her. You really have to decide what is the right thing to do. (Jodi)

We all have such big guilt trips. I think everybody wants to do such a good job and you hear so many stories come out of the newspapers about how important the first couple years are, how important that is, and you are just constantly hoping you are doing what you should be doing. Any time you think you are not doing what you should be doing, you feel guilty, like am I going to scar them forever because of this? I think that is part of the guilt. (Susan)

Specific reference to pressures as self-imposed. Related to the second sub-category the following examples highlight women's references to much of the pressures and expectations of being a mother as self-imposed or internal. When asked to talk about expectations she feels as a mother, Terri commented, “I think most of mine are self-imposed.” There are references to pressures and expectations as “self-imposed” in the following passages:

A lot of the pressures I think I inflict on myself. It goes back to when you have the baby and hold the child in your arms, you realize you have all these years to try to shape and mold this individual into a human being. So I think there is a lot of pressure in raising them. It is a big responsibility. That is one I feel I put on myself. (Brenda)

I have talked about this with a lot of women and we all talk about it. I think some of it we just do to ourselves... Part of it is you just feel like you need to be there. That is part of the all encompassing. It is your big job and it is just so important and everybody keeps telling you it is so important that you think it must be true. (Susan)

The women talked about pressure they put on themselves because of “wanting to make all the right decisions,” and because of the huge responsibility they feel in raising their children.

I suppose to a certain amount I expect myself to be perfect. I said before that I worry about every decision I make and how that will affect the person she will be. I guess I would like to try to do it perfectly. I don't think I am foolish enough to think that I will....It's always easier to blame yourself...A lot of pressure is just on myself. Just wanting to make all the right decisions. (Holly)

But if you didn't do all that, you wouldn't feel like you were doing your job. I wouldn't anyway. There was one day I was having morning sickness and everything and I forgot to

send a lunch ticket to school with Linda and she didn't have a ticket. They didn't call me, she borrowed one from someone and it turned out okay. But I felt so terrible that I didn't just hold it together. (Whitney)

I don't know if we really know where it is coming from. I think pressure from the outside world. Again perceptions like how are the teachers thinking when I don't come to pick up my child because she is sick? Or what is the nurse thinking when my daughter goes in with an earache and I didn't know about it. Comparing yourself to others and wondering what other people are thinking about your ability as a parent. (Rachel)

This final passage is not specifically related to the preceding category of women's self-imposed pressures and expectations. I have chosen it because it is a good example of the overall pressures and expectations several of the women in this study experience in their daily lives. Susan in her interview said

The pressure and expectations, you get from many different places. From reading the paper, from this, from that. One person tells you that you should be a fulfilled woman and have a career and have the motherhood and it is the whole myth of being able to have it all. It gives you pressure because you read about these people in magazines and they seem to have it all and you think how do they do that, what am I screwing up that this isn't working for me. My house is a mess, my kids, I get them to daycare and realize I haven't brushed their hair and their shirt is dirty because they got it dirty at breakfast, and you feel like you are not living up to what you are supposed to be doing. Everybody expects everything of you. You are supposed to be the perfect parent and if you are not, God forbid, somebody call child welfare on you and then you just hope you don't get someone that has had a cranky day and they decide to take your kids away. (Susan)

Mothers' connections to their children

As I heard the women in the study talking about the sacrifices they make along with the tremendous emotional exhaustion and constant sources of pressure and expectations in their lives, I felt inclined to ask, "What makes it all worth it?" It might appear to an outsider that the "costs" of mothering would outweigh the potential benefits. Despite the sometimes heavy burdens associated with mothering, women in the study described an intense connection they feel with their children and described simple things such as "hugs" or "mommy, I love you" as making it worth it. The areas that will be discussed related to women's experiences of connection to their children are (a) descriptions of the meaning and new perspectives children offer to life, (b) feelings of responsibility for "molding and shaping" another human being, and (c) an "indescribable" bond they had with their children. The

following passage offers a nice example of how this connection played out in their daily experiences with their children:

[When asked to talk about her experience of connection with her child.] The first thing that comes to my mind is sitting up with a fussy child in the middle of the night. Just sitting there rocking them, being bone tired, but still just loving holding them close, for some reason that memory is sticking out. One night Molly was really, really fussy and I took her downstairs and I rocked her and rocked her and even though I was so tired and so frustrated, it was just so wonderful to just sit there and hold her. (Susan)

Meaning and new perspectives

The first area of connection women described was related to the meaning and new perspectives that having children brings to one's life. Several mothers described the overall experience of giving birth to a child or seeing your child for the first time. One woman said, "The process of giving birth itself connects you with other women" (FG1); and another said, "That baby moving inside you, there is no other experience that a woman can feel. There is a bond. I was just thinking how wonderful" (FG4). It is important to notice the empowerment women feel through giving birth. They describe this as something that is important because only women can do it, as evident in the following comment: "Men can't do that [give birth]. That is the one that that women can do" (FG4). It is also important to notice that in this comment the women chose to say "that is the *one* thing women can do" with the emphasis on one. I feel this shows the lack of power this woman might feel in relation to males. Other research has indicated that giving up this area of "power" in order to allow men to be more involved is rather difficult for some women. This will be discussed in more depth related to the theme of mother/father differences in parenting.

Mothers talked about the meaning that children give to one's life and how the simple things that children do make it "worth it." Oberman and Josselson (1996) talk about the complexity of motherhood and the inherent contradictions of emotions mothers experience. They write, "One source of confusion is the discrepancy between the boredom, frustration, and anger of many women looking after their children, and a conviction that the experience of bearing and raising children is the most

meaningful one in their lives” (p. 343). Whenever the women talked about the meanings of mothering in their lives and their connections to their children, it elicited a lot of emotion and many times the women seemed overwhelmed by trying to put into words what they felt for their children. One woman’s comment highlights this best:

Just that bond from the moment you see them it is indescribable and it is so strong to have that. I can’t even put it into words when I think about my children. The unconditional love. Just to get those hugs... (FG3)

Rachel had a hard time finding the words to describe what she felt as well:

There really isn’t an emotion. You have your happy, or sad, or gloomy but there really isn’t an emotion as to how you feel exhilarated by your own child. (Rachel)

Others talked about connections to their children within the perspective of the meaning their children bring into their lives.

I would just say it gives a meaning to everything else because you know I’m glad of my career and it’s wonderful but there’s nothing, but if I had to give up that for the kids I would in a second. I mean I just wouldn’t think about it. The career is nice, but without the children it’s kind of meaningless. (FG1)

My life would be so empty without them. Maybe that is just something you have to experience. When you are a parent you know the feeling. (FG3)

One mother described being a mother as this – “I just think it is the best thing that I’ve ever done, the most successful” (FG4). For many of the women it appeared that being a mother is a central identity in their lives, perhaps one that brings tremendous pressure and exhaustion but at the same time great joy and rewards. When asked to talk about “What makes it worth it?” the responses were generally related to the simple daily signs of affection they receive from their children highlighted in the following quotations:

What makes it worth being a mom? That little hug, that smile. (Terri)

Any hug, any kiss, just the funny things they do. I don’t know what I laughed at before I had kids. They keep me laughing; they do things that are so funny. (Susan)

It is the smiles...the time she runs up from behind me and gives me a hug and a kiss. She just seems to know when I need them. I think it is neat to see things through kids’ eyes. (Brenda)

It's trying to find part of us in them. (FG2)

The last comment about "trying to find part of us in them" really seemed to be an important part of mothering in these women's lives. There seemed to be a general consensus of seeing their child as a reflection of themselves.

Responsibility to shape and mold another human being

Mothers described children as a "huge responsibility" as well as a unique chance to "shape and mold" another person and make a difference in the world. The following passages illustrate these concepts:

I think too it is just an awesome thing when you are thinking about this little person that you are going to help shape and mold. That is overwhelming to me. (FG3)

I think a lot of it goes back to when they are first born and you think God has given me this huge responsibility. (Brenda)

I just wanted to say it is a very important thing to be a mom, the idea that how you are raising your child has a lasting effect when they grow up. It is very important. (FG2)

...just to know you created that and to know that you can mold that person. (Jodi)

It is just this feeling of connection. I feel a sense of pride having created a child and I'm sure that it is not the same for everyone but it is a sense of responsibility that I am going to make him live as the best person he can be. It is a good responsibility. (FG2)

As evident through the above comments, women talked about the pride they feel in having been a part of creating a child. Along with that comes the personal responsibility they feel for how the child will turn out. A lot of this comes from societal pressure of always "blaming the mother" when something goes wrong.

What they do down the road will come back on me. I feel like I am a parent forever. I took that choice. I have to look back and see what society will say about me. It is a life long process. (FG4)

You almost do think that way. If I don't get them off on the right foot, they'll keep going in that direction and be failures in life. (Terri)

I think that I have the idea that the choices you make and the way you interact with them all of that factors into who they are as a young adult. I feel a huge amount of responsibility with that. (Holly)

Even though you may not be responsible for the way your kids behave, society sees that. Take the Columbine kids; society blames parents (Rachel)

I think I want to do everything that I can to make my kids turn out to be good people, moral people, happy, confident, and that is a lot of pressure. And it is all put on the mom pretty much. (Whitney)

While this may seem a tremendous and unjust prejudice towards women, these women did not necessarily describe the sense of responsibility in a negative, burdensome way. In fact they seemed to take great pride in the role they have to shape and mold their children's lives.

I think that there are times when we are having one of those days and you wonder and then you hope they will look back and say she was a very good mom and taught you right from wrong. (FG3)

First off it is the awe that I had a hand in creating this, I had this child and that is amazing in itself. Them growing and learning. (Susan)

Well, when they get older and get invited to people's houses and then I hear, your kids are so polite, they did this and that and it makes you feel good because you think you must have done something right here. (FG2)

As challenging as it is, it is still well worth it knowing the influence you have on them. (FG4)

An indescribable bond

The final theme related to women's connection to their children emerged from their general discussions of what it is like to be a mother or how they seem to define mothering in their lives. This is illustrated through the following passages:

I think it is hard to explain. You can feel it, but when people ask you, you say it is just the enormous amount of love you have for them. There was something I remember with our oldest daughter, I just loved to watch her sleep, and I still do. I do all of them, but I remember specifically that was one thing with her. It is indescribable. You think when you get married, you love your husband so much, there couldn't possibly be anyone that I would love more than that or equally. But then you have a child and you just think WOW! (Brenda)

I can't describe what I feel about being a mom. I think it is the most important thing I have ever done, and I'm pregnant and I'm going to cry. It is just so worth it, when you go to check on them at night and they are laying there all clean and snugly and sound asleep and you go sit on their bed, you forget the whole day, it is just totally out the window. Or when they say, "Mommy, I want to be like you," you just can't describe how that makes you feel. There is nothing that compares to it. I don't think a job could give you that much satisfaction. I feel like I have sacrificed my time, like the six year thing, but I don't think I've ever really

sacrificed. I think it is the best thing I've ever done. I am not a perfect mother but I can't imagine never having them. (Whitney)

Only one mother in the study talked about not having such an intense connection to her child as the others. She also seemed to be the one perhaps most struggling with balancing her own personal desires for work and a career with those of being a mother. She seemed to have strong views in each direction that really didn't complement each other. For example she seemed to have a strong feeling that it would be best for her child for her to be home full time with him and especially if she has more children; however, she also felt that she would really enjoy having a career and wanted to pursue her goals in that area, which she was already doing by going to graduate school. She seemed to be feeling very pulled in both directions. In fact she talked about how "torn" she felt by this internal struggle. Along with this, she also talked about a lack of connection she felt with her son. At several points of our interview she mentioned this, first related to the birth of her child and later related to spending the weekend away from him a couple of years later. Here is what she said

I heard before that mothers are very connected with the child. So when Matthew was first born, the first evening I was alone with him in the hospital after Alan had gone home for a while, and I was looking at him and I was thinking I didn't really feel that strong connection. I'm thinking this is my baby, this is my son, and he came from me. I was trying to get that feeling and thinking it shouldn't be like this, we should be bonded very close. That was my first experience...but then a week later, then my feelings had flipped and I felt just the opposite. I was very comfortable with him. That was my first experience with feeling "the bond." In some ways I think it is a little different for me. I don't feel as strongly as I hear other people talking about, like this weekend I was gone and I didn't miss Matthew at all. When I got home I was happy to see him and he was real excited to see me when I got home, but I didn't really feel like I missed him... [Another time she was gone with her husband for four or five days.] I didn't miss him a bit. I hardly thought about him at all... [She talked about how other people on the trip constantly talked about missing their children.] At the same time, it is not that I don't feel close to him, just not as strong as some other people do. ...I just feel a little more distance from him. (Shelly)

Shelly's comments were not representative of the overall group. Generally, mothers talked about the intense connection they felt with their children. The following passages give a few examples of the emotions women used to describe their experiences related to connections with their children:

It is like, pride and awe and joy and love and laughter. It is like everything rolled into one. It is like every happy feeling you have all rolled into one. (Susan)

I was the first one to say, when are we going to do this again? [describing immediately after having her first child, when she was still in hospital] We were just in awe, we had a baby. It was just so incredible. (FG2)

The whole thing is awesome and amazing. The time goes very fast and I wouldn't change it for a minute or take anything back. (FG3)

It is pride and sadness. I think that is a good way to explain motherhood. You wear your heart on the outside. (FG4)

The final two passages offer nice examples of the experience of connection in these mothers' lives.

Mothering is the process of going through day to day. It's dealing with their hurts, their tears, their temper tantrums with their, you know, joys and triumphs and sending them off to the first day of school with tears in your eyes. (FG1)

Wow! I guess the first time that I realized I had such an intense connection was when she was a month old. We went to a play, Miss Saigon and there was a part in that play where a guy was going to kill her kid and she shot him. Afterwards I said to Jason, my husband, I wouldn't think twice about killing anyone. Every time I think about it... [and she doesn't continue because she has tears rolling down her face] (Holly)

Mother/father differences in parenting and the influence of the marital relationship

In previous sections I have discussed how women have sacrificed their careers for their husbands to be able to pursue careers; they have also sacrificed time from their own hobbies (i.e. the woman who used to be an athlete and while her husband still gets to work out, she "had" to give that up or the woman who says, "I give time to my husband so he can go out and do what he wants to do and then there is no time left for yourself" (FG2); and they have often sacrificed time with their husbands, as is evident in the following comment:

I haven't talked to my husband alone for a long time. When he sits in my car I think you are in my car because I'm always with the kids in the backseat and never next to him. Last night they were noisy and tired and we were tired so we put them to bed at 7 and then it was quiet so we could talk. I asked, don't you have anything to say after the last 6 months when we haven't said a word? It's not that we don't want to but because you don't get a chance" (FG3)

In addition to these issues between spouses, five primary themes emerged. These themes were related to (a) traditional gender roles, (b) wives' perceptions of their husbands' expectations, (c) wives'

directive in the parenting role, (d) mothers' feelings of empathy for fathers, and (e) mothers' need for validation from their husbands.

Traditional gender roles

The first category was related to the traditional gender roles women are in. While most claimed to be in "equal" relationships with their spouses, most did not describe the details of their relationships as equal, in this case specifically related to parenting issues. In the following passage, Rachel talked about her and her husband's teamwork parenting:

He and I are pretty compatible when it comes to parenting. We both have the same goals, same discipline strategy and the same expectations... If I can't do something, he picks up where I left off and if he can't do something I pick up where he left off. So it is more of a teamwork and we don't have specific roles. (Rachel)

Rachel also made the following comment about her husband's expectations regarding their "roles" during the summer when she has time off from teaching:

Each summer I say this will be the summer we do nothing and then extra things come up. But he [her husband] still expects, like I have to do the dinner by myself. Even though you are home, you are expected to do more than when you working. (FG2 by same woman from I4)

Rachel talked about feeling that she and her husband share "equal basic duties" related to child care (although it doesn't seem this way based on the above comment); however, she discussed how she bears more of the emotional work in the parenting. This illustrates the overall tendency of these mothers to classify their relationships with their husbands as equal or to describe their husbands as more involved than past generations; however, they offered several descriptions of daily examples of gender inequality within their relationships. The following quotation is also from Rachel. She said

I think it is because I am female. I don't know if it is just something you do because you are supposed to, or if it is something you have learned to do, or if it is just something you do. But I think that mothers and fathers do take on different roles. I don't mean, he does laundry and I do dishes, but I am the organizer, I am the scheduler, I am the "go ask your mother," I am the final say, the vetoer. But that is just the way it is in my family and that is the way I grew up. I don't know if it is that way everywhere... I don't think it will ever get to the point where emotionally fathers and mothers are the same. I think roles are changing, but emotionally it is still the same (Rachel)

The next passage shows a traditional gender division in the family; however, the wife initiated it. This mother said

I'm a stay at home mom, which was a big adjustment for me when I moved here. I am from California, but I moved here four years ago and I retired and I told my husband if you are going to drag me half way across the United States honey, I am going to stay home. He said okay, so I stay home. (FG1)

Again there is a traditional family arrangement, yet this time initiated by the husband's wishes.

When me and Gary got married he said when we had Sara he said he wanted me to be a stay-home mom. I said that was ok. He just said that when I got married he didn't want his wife to have to work. He was in farming and still is but we needed my income and that makes the difference. I had to work....for him, he didn't want me to [work] but it wasn't a choice then. (FG3)

The next passage shows the influence of Terri's family of origin on her feelings about her and her husband's situation. There are some contradictions in her statement. She talked about her husband being more involved and more sharing going on; however, she added that he is taking the children for two hours, which doesn't seem like much compared to the other 22 hours of the day.

I think part of it is your upbringing. Mine was a very traditional upbringing. My mom was a country club wife. She was a nurse and she married a doctor. She stayed home. My dad was not as involved with raising us kids. My dad made the money and that was it. We, Jay and I, definitely have more sharing going on, but I take on a lot more. I just think it is tradition. Actually I feel very blessed. My husband is very involved compared to some men I know. Like tonight he is taking them for two hours and it is wonderful. I need more of that. (Terri)

The next passage shows similar contradictions as well. Shelly first described parenting roles as a system of tradeoffs; however, the latter part of her passage certainly does not show a pattern of tradeoffs. In fact as Terri commented about having a couple of hours "off," Shelly talked about her husband taking their child for a couple of hours as well. She said

I feel we [she and her husband] kind of have a system of tradeoffs. [She then talked about times when she has a big paper coming up and her husband takes their son a little more than usual...] So just the way our schedules are, it ends up I have to do more with him than Alan. It seems to me I do a lot more of the putting him to bed, dressing him and getting him ready to go in the morning. It's kinda the way things work out, as I am usually the one that takes him to daycare. So Alan is not up or he is already gone so I have to do it. There is a bit of tradeoff where some days Matthew is my main responsibility but other days Alan may have charge of him for a couple of hours. Like this weekend, I was gone to that conference so Alan had him for the whole weekend. He knew that was coming. (Shelly)

The next passage shows a good illustration of the process Whitney went through in forming a “traditional” family. She said

I think I have a kind of traditional family life. My husband works and I stay home. I never thought it would turn out that way. We never planned it; I never pictured myself being a stay-home mom until I actually had kids. I never wanted to do it. My mom was a stay-home mom and I just took it for granted. I didn't see the good in it really. I think that women in our generation just don't, and I think maybe the boys grew up and maybe their moms did work and so they assume their wives will work. Or they know financially that most people need two incomes. It would be really great if we had another income. It seems like to get by, and people want all this stuff and they are not willing to give that up, so I think at least men in our generation just assume. I mean Scott would have never asked me to stay home if I hadn't brought it up. It never dawned on him. We would just handle the daycare. It never dawned on him that one of us should be home until I actually said one of us has to be here. You make more money than I do and if I had been making more money than he had, I have no doubt he would have stayed home....[so in your situation, it wasn't just the mom that had to stay home, but a parent?] Not at that time. Now that I have been home, I am too selfish; I want to be involved in all that stuff. If I was at work and my husband was doing it all, I would be really jealous... Now that I have my kids and if we were both still working and they are eight and four and I'm pregnant again and we are deciding, I don't think it would be a question. I would say, I have to stay home. I don't know why, I just think now that I have been home I appreciate the things that I am doing for them. (Whitney)

Also related to traditional gender roles, commonalities across mothers emerged related to the more emotional aspects of parenting. In the following three passages, the mothers' descriptions of worry and perceptions of gender differences are illustrated:

My husband says sometimes when I say to him, you don't worry, and he says I don't have to worry because you worry so much. So maybe it is we just take it upon ourselves because we think it is what we are supposed to do. So husbands feel they don't have to because they know you are doing it. (Debra)

I feel like he [husband] has the same amount of responsibility but he doesn't worry about it quite so much...sometimes I get tired of being the one who worries and sometimes I want my husband to worry more so I wouldn't have to...[Do you think if he worried more that you would worry less?] I think that but I probably wouldn't. (Holly)

I don't know if it is a gender thing, but they don't think of everything as the whole picture as we do. Or maybe it is they don't stress out as much about the little things as we do. (Whitney)

In the following passages, women talked about ways of easing their guilt related to leaving the children alone with their husbands. It appears they try to justify that it is good for the fathers to spend

time with their children, so they want to convince themselves that is okay to relinquish some of their "duties."

I feel guilty when I'm gone but I remind myself that they need and he needs it too. [time for the father and children alone] (FG4)

I know if I am home, I am still the primary caregiver, even if he is home. I am the one they run to, I am the one that says it is time for bed, I have to do all that. But if I am not there, he takes care of it just fine. (Susan)

I feel it is important for him [my husband] to spend time with them. That is why when I go out on a Saturday and leave Jay with the kids for a few hours, I always say it is good for him, he needs this time with his kids. I don't know if I am trying to convince myself. But he always does very well. Sometimes I feel guilty if I want to go to the grocery store, I don't get, "Oh sure honey that's okay." But I think that is true for a lot of women. (Terri)

Wives' perceptions of their husbands' expectations

The second theme in the area of the marital relationships was somewhat related to the first in that it describes traditional gender roles; however, it is specifically related to the mothers' perceptions of their husbands' expectations for them in the domestic area. Several commented on feeling that their husbands expect them to take on more of the domestic responsibilities as evident in the following passages:

It seems like although you are working less you are still expected to do as much or even more because like your husband knows that you have that extra time and he doesn't expect to participate in a few of the things. (FG2)

Sometimes I get that from my husband. Why did you save the dishes for me, you know. He doesn't usually say that but I can see it when he's loading the dishwasher. She's home all day she didn't do the dishes. (FG1)

Well it's like you talk about keeping the house clean and one day, my husband came home and I said you know it was clean two hours ago. (FG1)

It appears these women sense pressure from their husbands or have received the message that it is their job to keep the house clean in addition to other domestic responsibilities. The following passage is an interesting example of how Susan tried to work with her husband to change this pattern. In this passage, she talked about an example of trying to negotiate with him to take over some of the morning chores.

Our classic argument about him doing more goes, "Honey I am really getting tired of doing everything." One night I was sitting there and I said, "Honey, I can't do everything in the morning, I just can't, this is driving me nuts." And what invariably happens is, I know it is his guilt coming out, but it is "okay fine, I'll just sleep less hours;" it is this whole, I work how many hours a day, blah blah blah, but yes I can get up earlier. Then I have been given this guilt trip of why should I be asking you to do anymore? I have tried to hold my ground and in a way that doesn't say I think you are not pulling your weight, or why can't you do more. I have tried not to make it into a yelling or pushing match. But it doesn't always work. It will work for a couple days and I think a lot of it is getting out of habits and I don't know how you get out of habits. (Susan)

Wives' directive in the parenting role

The third significant theme in this area was related to how the husbands take directive from their wives for guidance in the parenting role. The following few passages show how mothers feel a certain amount of pressure from their husbands seeking directive related to parenting decisions:

I always think there's a pressure too because sometime I feel like my husband looks to me to lead for like punishment or something like if she does something he's like what do you think we should be doing. And I'll say because I'm spending time with her, I'll say well okay she's doing this and I've started doing this. But I don't get that back from him as much. I don't get as much input from him on like how do you think we should handle this. It's more like he kind of takes my lead and then I'm thinking do I know what I'm doing? (FG1)

He is much more involved with the kids. I really have to give him that much...I give him more directive...Even now Jay will ask where are Alan's pajamas and I say you've put them away a million times. He says he doesn't know and then asks what shoes I want him to wear. I always have to make the decisions and sometimes you want to say, JUST TAKE A PAIR! It's like he has them there in front of your face. I think Jay still leans to me to make all the decisions for the children...He just feels that I am the one with them all day and I know the routine, I have my set routine and he is more of a helper not the initiator. (Terri)

It's a lot of work I think from his [her husband's] point of view to jump in and you know I think he's just like oh it's just easier if you just let mom figure this out but then I feel like when he's home I'm looking for him to jump in. I will never forget and never let him forget two days ago he said, "I'm trying to load the dishwasher" and he's like "Could you please take Carmen, I'm trying to load the dishwasher. When there's two people here one of us should be able to help the other out" and I said, "Oh I wanted that line, when two people are here, if two people are here, umm okay cuz that's what I always think when daddy gets home it should be easier you know because there's two of us to help but yet it's not because they all come to me including daddy. [Everyone laughs.] "I'm trying to load the dishwasher can you get her away." "What do you think I do all day? Do I have someone to send them off to when you're not home?" (FG1)

Judging from the data, it is hard to discern if this directive is in fact "created" by the wives' control over the parenting arena. Jordan (1995) found that it is quite common for mothers to serve as

gatekeepers “controlling fathers’ access to the child and enactment of the paternal role” (p. 66).

Several mothers talked about issues of control, specifically related to the level of control they feel they have in the parenting arena. In fact, several stated they have a hard time giving up this control.

[Related to their discussion of mothers’ control over fathers...] It’s you get to pick what the snacks are, you buy the groceries so you know that there’s not like a lot of fruity pebbles or whatever it is they buy, so there’s a lot of control [Lots of agreement and interjections from the group] And that’s very comforting because you think I can. [Another interjection.] And it’s hard to give up too. (FG1)

I have kind of a strong personality and sometimes my husband naturally defers to me, like what should Haley wear? I don’t care, why is my decision any better than yours? Sometimes I get tired of him asking me questions about decisions that he can make. (Holly)

Some women have a tendency to say I can’t be away for too long because I am not sure my husband can handle this or handle that. I have thought to myself, I know my husband can handle it and I’ve thought either I am really lucky that I have a husband that can do this or they have trained that man to not be able to do anything. I think some of them do. For some people the mothering thing is so encompassing that they can’t let go of any part of it. So they want to make sure they are home to put them to bed because that is part of their job. (Susan)

While Susan sounded as if she and her husband have a different relationship, perhaps a more balanced relationship, her next comment clearly shows some gender differences in the relationship, specifically related to control of domestic or parenting roles. She said, “He does things differently than I do. That has been the hardest thing for me, to let go of it. Once I have given it to him as his job, to just let go of it and not meddle.” (Susan) This phrase certainly signaled some issues of control. Kranichfeld (1987) points out that while women’s power has traditionally been measured based on male standards, such as economic or political power, when viewed from a perspective of maternal status, women actually have a significant level of a different type of power. He feels that because women are typically the caregivers, they have significant power over shaping future generations. Not specifically related to gender differences, but in looking at the interaction of caregiving between family member as caregiver and professional caregivers such as home nurses, Hasselkus (1988) found that the family members often felt they had, what he termed, an ownership of special knowledge. In other words, the family member felt that nobody could take care of his/her relative as well as she could. This appears

to be similar in mothers' feelings about who, perhaps, provides the most adequate care to their children. In another passage, Susan gives another example that clearly shows gender divisions. She said

I was away in Chicago helping my sister, I left on a Thursday evening and I would have loved to have a camera in the house to see how it goes on Friday morning getting everybody up and ready because he has a problem of waking up 30 minutes before he has to leave. He gets himself dressed and that is it. I get up, I get the kids up, I get them dressed, I have to do all this stuff and I just wish I could have watched it. I just wondered how smoothly it would go, the whole key was him getting out of bed on time. There are times I wonder why I let myself have to do all this. Is it because I have just taken this over, but yet I wonder if I don't do it, is it going to get done? (Susan)

Susan later talked about wanting her husband to do more yet feeling guilty when she asks more of him. This is shown in passages related to the following area regarding husband/wife roles, specifically wives' feelings of empathy for their husbands.

Mothers' feelings of empathy for fathers

The mothers expressed an apparent level of empathy for fathers' situations. While the mothers themselves are often facing tremendous pressure and expectations, there were several references to feeling guilty for laying any of these "burdens" onto the fathers as the fathers also have their fair share of burdens and responsibility. This is shown in the following passages:

I think that when you talk about it being hard for me. I think it is hard when you talk about moms finding time, it is hard for them [dads] to find time too. They feel like he is the sole supporter of the family and he works a long day and he is tired and when he comes home the kids are ready to jump all over him and I'm ready for him to get home because I'm tired too. (FG3)

Jay [her husband] works all day outside the home and I have done that because I have been in the work force so I know how I felt when I got home with a headache from dealing with work issues. I feel guilty saying, Jay I am going out with the girls tonight which I never do, or I am going to go shop for an hour without the kids, can you watch the kids. I don't feel comfortable doing that to my husband. I think that is something that is my problem. (Terri)

I tell people a lot of times that I am really glad that I am a woman instead of a man, because I think they have a lot of other challenges. I hate to have my husband come home, even if I have had a really bad day, and unload on him, because he has had an equally long day. They have their own stresses and pressures too. (Brenda)

As previously cited, women often perceive their share of the housework as equitable when literally speaking it is not (Demo & Acock, 1993). Demo and Acock found that even though the women in their study did an average of 70% of the family work, the women in all groups reported that they felt their share of the work was equitable. In the next passage, Susan talked about understanding the stresses fathers face and she also seemed to push her needs aside to empathize with her husband's work demands, such as getting home late at night. However, it is also significant to consider that while he has been gone on business, she has worked full time and taken care of the children alone. Therefore, she has probably gotten to bed equally late, if not later, and is equally exhausted. She shows empathy for his situation and adds that on other days she would appreciate his "help."

It is hard because for him he will talk about the stress he has and I know he has stress because he feels like he has to provide for the family and he works so hard because he wants us to have a better life. I told him I understand when he travels, like the other day he got home at the airport at ten at night, he had been in New York, and you never sleep very well on a business trip and those days I don't expect him to get up bright and early and help me out. But other days I would like him to. (Susan)

The final dialogue related to this theme occurred in the first focus group and shows a level of sympathy for fathers related to what these mothers perceived as the "privilege" of a stronger bond with the children.

My husband the other day was almost crying, "Why do they love you sooo much and they don't love me," and I'm like, "Oh they love you." They do, they adore him, he's a fantastic father but I mean I am, they wake up in the morning where's mom you know and if I'm not there, where's mom, is she coming, you know I am their life [Someone interjects.] Yeah, I feel sorry for my husband sometimes. [Another interjection.] Oh I do too. [Several nod as if in agreement.] (FG1)

While it seems that women give more directive in the parenting role, possibly because this is an area where women experience considerable power, they also significantly downplay their husbands' lack of participation in several basic parenting tasks. DeVault (1991) found that the women in her study typically offered "practical" reasons for why they did more household labor and minimized the influence of gender. For example, women explained that they cook because they are at home more or because they are better cooks than their husbands. While DeVault was examining the

gender roles of providing meals for the family, this seems to apply to examining mother/father differences in parenting. DeVault believe that women's minimizing of their partners' family work serves to further differentiate between male and female gender roles, serving to divide the genders in positions of inequality.

Mothers' need for validation from their husbands

The final theme was related to women's need for validation from their husbands regarding their mothering roles. Some of the mothers actively sought this validation, as evident in the first two passages, while others talked about desiring more acknowledgment on their husbands' part, as evident in the other passages.

He [my husband] gave me a card the last year and it said I have come to realize how hard you work. He sees that he doesn't always say it and it has been a great learning experience for me. (FG4)

I think a lot of it comes from your spouse and how he views your role as a mom. Jay once said at a church group we went to where you talked about your spouse and why you appreciated about them. One of his first comments was, "She is a wonderful mom!" And you think, "Oh, thank you!" (Terri)

The next passages show mothers need for validation from their husbands. For some they feel they will get that once their spouses have "gotten a taste" of what it is like.

Yeah, mine's [husband] pretty good – but they come home and say well why are you yelling at her. Okay, you haven't been here for the last three hours and tonight I'm going to love it. I'll go home and I can hear what he went through and it's like thank you, this is my whole day. (FG1)

It is good too if you have a spouse who is very reaffirming too because I think sometimes dads don't realize if you are staying at home and that moms usually spend most of the time with the kids and I don't think they realize how many things you are juggling all at once, unless, they do it for a day or two. (Brenda)

The final two passages show mothers' need for validation of the work they do in their roles as mothers:

Emotional exhaustion is not only about being a mother; it also goes again to your relationship to your spouse. You start blowing on him saying you don't understand all the pressure we [mothers] have getting everything together. (Jodi)

Yes, I pick up a lot of the slack in our family and I think that is typical. And sometimes I don't feel very appreciated and I have told him that. And he says, "No you are really appreciated. I don't know what I would do without you." One of the things he knows it and doesn't voice it enough to make me feel like it. We got a camper this summer and we have gone camping several times this summer, just a pop up camper, and I am the one that get everything ready. I get the kids packed, I get me packed, I get the food packed. (Susan)

Jordan (1995) found that there was a strong need for validation from husbands among the women in her study. She found this especially true for stay-home mothers. She wrote

...each mother needed her mate to validate that staying home with the baby was an important and valued activity. Mothers wanted their mates to understand the intense demands of taking care of an infant all day, that there were good reasons why nothing else got accomplished. (p. 68)

The last part of this statement also goes back to mothers' perceptions of their husbands' expectations, in that, they need their husbands to understand that the demands of children often take up all of their time, thus leaving little time for other "domestic" chores.

Issues of loss surrounding motherhood

While people typically associate the word loss with a negative connotation, this discussion about issues of loss related to motherhood is not intended to be seen as a wholly negative aspect of mothering, however, issues of various types of loss were apparent in the women's discussions of their motherhood experience. Related to typical losses experienced in the caregiving role, Skaff and Pearlin write, "The notion of loss of self helps to capture a very personal cost of the caregiving experience" (p. 663).

In order to support women emotionally it is important to be aware of the losses women may experience in their transition to parenthood – one might also refer to these as changes associated with the transition. Whether using the word loss or change, it is still important to acknowledge the emotional consequences these changes may have for a woman's identity development. This is how one mother describes being a mother:

It [being a mother] totally changes everything about your life, in every way...I can't imagine anything else that can change your life like it unless it is a near death experience or something. (FG2)

Three main themes emerged related to mothers' experiences of loss. They are (a) loss of free time, (b) loss of career opportunities, and (c) loss of previous identity.

Loss of free time

One of the most apparent losses was related to loss of time to spend with husbands or with other friends. Sometimes as women became mothers, they lost closeness with their friends who did not yet have children. These issues are highlighted in the following quotations:

[Referring to before she had her child and being in college without any responsibilities other than school] Then all of a sudden when I got married and had a kid and now I don't really see those friends anymore. Now I hang out with two-year-olds and their moms. When I see those people I don't even have anything in common with them so that changed. Just the whole way I live my life. (FG2)

It [being a mother] does totally change your life; you are no longer focused on yourself...I don't have as many friends as I use to because they don't have kids or they don't have kids the same age. You have a tendency to bond with those people who have kids the same age...(FG2)

Losing times with friends is a concern as contact with friends often serves as a protective buffer against feelings of self-loss and negative self-evaluation (Skaff & Pearlin, 1992).

There were several times women talked about losing time with their spouses once they became parents. Because previous research has highlighted the importance of marital support in mediating the stresses associated with parenting (Belsky, 1984), this is an important area for further consideration – How can parents be encouraged to focus more on the marital relationship and how can they find time to do that given the time constraints so apparent in today's society? Some women talked about in a sense putting their marital relationship "on hold," yet reframed it by looking at the benefits of having a closer relationship with their children. This is highlighted in the following comments:

We are putting one part of our life, the part where it is just he and I on hold, but I think life in general, no because they are our life. (Rachel)

At one time I might have thought can't you ever just have time to yourself, before I had a kid, but I think that is ok. They are totally part of your life and your relationship and they change you and you are changed forever. (Holly)

Other women talked about losing out on spending one-on-one time with their husbands. One woman commented, "We only go out maybe five times a year" (FG 2). Other comments included:

The time you give up with your husband, I think sometimes Mike and I have lost getting to know each other more because you don't have all that time...so that is a sacrifice and our sex life. (Jodi)

I think for my husband and I, we have almost forgotten what it is like to just go on a date with each other. Whenever we are planning activities it is always with our daughter and other people with kids. We almost forget to take the time to just be with each other because you are so focused on your family and everyone is working. (FG2)

The next woman talked about what a hard adjustment it was for her and her husband to go from "being just the two of us to become the three of us."

I think that is still an adjustment for Sam and I. We were married for six years before we had Zach so we had so much time with just the two of us and the freedom you have with being just the two of you...but anyway it has been an adjustment for the two of us to become the three of us. We have known each other since we were 14 and it has always been Sam and Sandra, and now it is Sam, Sandra, and Zach. We have so much history and it is a real adjustment. (FG2)

Loss of career opportunities

Mothers experienced losses associated with various aspects of their career aspirations. While for the most part they talked about these changes as conscious choices, they were still experienced as losses. In an earlier section, Whitney talked about her long struggle to feel comfortable with her decision to stay home and not pursue a degree-related career. During the study, Whitney was expecting her third child and talked about how this would mean another six-year delay in pursuing her career goals. While she said that the only way she wanted a third child was if she would be able to continue to stay home, it was still apparent that she experienced some sense of loss from not pursuing her career or going back to school at this time. Losses associated with women's careers involved things from not getting promoted to losing professional recognition from colleagues because of

choices they made related to mothering. This woman talked about the obstacles she has faced in her career because of her choice to work part time.

If I didn't work I don't know that I would be happy either. I mean I worked for like 10 years before we had children. I had a career established. It's kind of hard to say okay that's all put aside and I'm going this direction...so I'm kind of trying to go in-between right now, but I go through a lot of guilt both ways... I have lost out on some things from work because of that [going part time], I know I have, but it was a decision I made and I have sat down and sat myself down and said like basically you maybe didn't get a promotion, but you knew that, and maybe it's not fair, maybe that's not how life should be but you knew that when you made that decision. (FG1)

Another woman talked about the obstacle she faces because she is a mother and a police officer (a combination she says that doesn't always mix). She said, "I will never make captain and that may be fine. I will be a lieutenant for the rest of my life" (FG1). The next passage is from Holly who has a doctorate degree in the biological sciences area and chose to do teaching rather than pursue further research. She has lost quite a lot of professional recognition from her colleagues because of the choice she made. She said

There are days when I think what if I would have taken a different choice and so for me what I should have done was get a Ph.D., do the appropriate post doc and then go on and get the research stuff. I just assumed that was what I would do then after I had Haley things didn't quite seem as important anymore. I think that for a lot of academics there is a lot of prestige and pride as to who you are. That stuff didn't seem so important in defining who I was as much anymore. (Holly)

When asked to describe what things do define who she is, Holly responded

Definitely how I view myself as a mom. If I feel like I'm doing a good job. That is a big one. (Holly)

While Holly seems to have made the choice she felt was best for her, she experiences a lot of disappointment from others in her department.

Just because professionally I decided to get off the fast track doesn't mean that I'm any less of a critical thinker or read a paper and evaluate it any less than I could before I made that decision. From a professional level I still need to be taken seriously for what is up here not for the choices I've made. That would be the one thing that I am missing that I would like. (Holly)

Loss of previous identity

Other areas of loss were related to loss of previous identity, as well as a loss of an identity separate from that of their children. This is apparent in the following passages:

You get to be known like I am as Kaley's mom [Someone else adds.] I remember when someone came up to me and said, "Oh you are Brian's mom." That was a neat thing for me. It's like he has friends now and I am known by his mom. It is a great identity. (FG4)

When I'm at home with my daughter I just would be there all the time but when I'm at work I enjoy being my own person there and there is the only place I can still be me without being there for someone. (FG3)

The following passages highlight other times women experienced loss or "changes" in their identity because of choices they made related to mothering:

Quitting daycare you know doing it for 8 years it was the hardest decision we've ever had to make because it had been my, what I was known for. (FG1)

I feel like I have sacrificed a lot of myself and I wouldn't trade it for the world, but I think that is what mothers do and giving up you to raise a baby. (FG4)

Some people aren't ever going to give me a chance because of the choices I've made and that is too bad but most people when we get into a conversation and going away in a couple weeks to a meeting, I am immersed in that situation. I am feeling like the old me and people treat me like the old me...[referred to last year at the same meeting when her child was an infant and she took her with her] Last year Jason was gone so I had to take Haley with me to the meeting and that is when I really noticed. Even when I asked questions they would like just blow me off and not take me seriously because I had a kid on my lap. I am looking forward to going this year and being the old me. (Holly)

Jodi and Shelly used the word "loss" to describe aspects of their mothering experiences:

[When asked, "What is the hardest thing about being a mom?"] Sometimes you just lose your identity. But this is the neatest thing too. It is a catch twenty-two situation. I'll walk into Teagan's class and some kids will say, "There is Teagan's mom. Teagan, Teagan, there is your mom." And to see Teagan's face is just wonderful, but I have a name. And you lose that. (Jodi)

[I asked this woman, "Are there any other things that you would add to your definition of sacrifice?"] Just the idea that when you give something up that is pretty important to you, you feel a loss. But with a family and child you get other benefits and gains in return. [I prompted her to talk a little more about the loss and how she feels about that.] On the one hand, it is a bit of loss because I feel like if I didn't have a family I could really concentrate on my studies and do really well and maybe go on to get published and do really great. I don't feel that I can do that because of my other responsibilities. But at the same time I try to look for the good things so it's not all loss. The one without family may do really well in her career but she

won't have the joy of family and children. She won't experience the joy of motherhood...It's almost like rationalism – it's a loss but at the same time maybe that wasn't the best thing for me to do anyway and I'd rather focus my attention this way. (Shelly)

The women in the study see motherhood as a major life change that while they chose it (for the most part) and feel that there are many rewards associated with being a mother, there are also several areas of confusion related to contradictory emotions of losing a previous lifestyle to gain a new one. In his research on the meaning in family caregiving related to caring for patients with Alzheimer's disease, Hasselkus (1988) found that some participants showed a powerful sense of role loss as they took on the role of caring for their relative. Ehrensaft (1995) found that separations of child and self were not as problematic for the fathers in her study. She wrote, "Not one man talked about his existence being at stake or about total confusion (What am I to do, who am I without her/him?) in response to separations. Several women did" (p. 56). The following is how a few of the women in this study described loss and sense of self related to mothering:

["How do you define sacrifice as a mother?"] Losing yourself. You have another human being to take care of not just yourself... You can't just come home anymore and just unwind. As they get older it will be easier but not with a toddler. I miss that; I miss that freedom sometimes. (Jodi)

When I am home, it is time to play legos or batman or watch Sesame Street. I really enjoy that and I don't consider it a sacrifice. For me it is really a privilege and it is a choice. The way I see it, I have made my choice. I want these kids and I am not giving them up. And I guess I want a career too, maybe I have too much ambition. It is not that I want, well maybe I do want to be President of University someday, maybe when they are bigger. I don't know; I cannot get beyond that. I remember sitting in my office thinking (5 years ago) I will decide this is what is important and I will give this percentage of my time here and that there. And here it is, my kid is 5 ½ years old and I'm still struggling. (Debra)

We had a life before the kids and then the kids are born and you don't think about the life before, because you get used to the one you have...sometimes thinking you forget what it used to be like and you are wondering what you missed, because you really don't remember what it was like anymore...I don't miss the way things used to be because I like the way they are now. I see what we are doing with the kids.(Rachel)

It is important to remember that in addition to the direct losses women talked about, they have also lost their ability to put their needs first, even their ability to meet basic needs first (as discussed in an earlier section), they have lost time to pursue personal needs such as exercise, outside

interests, and intimate relationships with husbands and friends, as well as often lost out on career opportunities whether by choice or not. Terri, who would be considered an “older” mother, first pursued a college degree, then spent several years traveling and working in a fast-paced career before having children and then choosing to stay at home with her children. She was very critical of women who do not stay home with their children, but she did talk about the importance of doing things for self-fulfillment before becoming a mother to prevent what she discussed as feelings of future regret.

She said

Again, I think my perspective would be different if I was 22 and right out of college. I think that alone is a big difference. I tell people one of my thoughts is wait at least two years before you get pregnant. One reason is you need to develop a bond with your spouse and without children. Because once you have children, their needs will take your time and energy and that is where your focus will be.... Do all the fun things, go to the movies spontaneously. You can't do that when you have kids.... You have to be ready to take on this stage and not look back and feel you didn't do something. That's why mothers look back and feel regret because they never had a job or a wild time. (Terri)

An interesting finding in the research of Skaff and Pearlin (1992) was that their measures of self-loss and self-gain were independent of one another. While it was expected that these two measures be at opposite ends of the spectrum, in fact, caregivers experienced both self-loss and self-gain. Oberman and Josselson (1996) discuss that while the transition to motherhood can be accompanied by an increase in feelings of self-esteem, it can also be riddled with “a sense of limitation and confinement, ambivalence about loss of their former lives, and insecurity about their identities outside the sphere of mothering” (p. 345).

Use of strong language

An interesting theme emerged through reading and rereading the focus group and interview transcripts. I believe that the words people choose to describe their experiences have a subconscious meaning. While reading how the women in this study described their mothering experiences, I began to see patterns of language usage centered on some rather strong themes. Three main themes emerged

– (a) language describing craziness and insanity, (b) language describing feelings of being torn and pulled; and (c) language describing lack of feeling like a person.

Feeling crazy or insane

One use of strong language was related to women's frequent referral to feelings of insanity or using words such as "crazy," "over the edge," or "falling apart." These words were used to describe anything from the reasons they worked -- "I think I work for my *sanity*" (FG1); to dinner time at their house -- "It is probably when everybody *falls apart* is right around suppertime" (FG3); to their relationship with their husband -- "We go out once a week, my husband and I. We just feel we really need time out. It makes a big difference and that is one thing that we have done because we felt that we were *falling apart*" (FG4); or related to how they feel about parenting -- "My husband and I say that when we are just about to go *crazy*. It is just a stage" (FG4). Another woman used the words *over the edge* to describe her experience of having a third child, "I thought three would be a piece of cake, but that third baby definitely puts you *over the edge*" (FG1).

The following passages highlight a few other examples of how women used words that described their feelings of "insanity" or "craziness."

I put a lot of pressure on myself and I'm getting better but for a while I thought I was going to go *crazy*. (FG2)

It is just a big relief to hear that their child is doing the same thing yours is and they aren't *crazy* and I'm not *crazy*. (FG4)

I think the books really helped me. I don't know what I would have done without them. I think I would have *lost my mind*. (Whitney)

So projects like this I think they help you realize you are not *crazy*, you are not alone, that it is okay to feel conflicted and it is okay to want to be a mom. (Debra)

Too many people are trying to raise our children like it is a part-time job. It isn't. It *sucks everything out of you*... This women's lib and stuff, we are driving ourselves *crazy*. (FG4)

Feeling torn

Another way that women tended to use strong words to describe their experiences were related to times they doubt themselves or the constant pressure of wanting to make the “right” choices. Here they frequently used words such as feeling torn – “You are *torn* in several different directions” (FG2); pulled – “I’m feeling kind of *pulled* between the two” (FG2); or giving up themselves – “It is a demanding thing. Once that baby comes you kind of *give up your life* and put it on hold” (FG4).

Focusing on descriptions of “giving up you” or “putting your life on hold,” the following passages illustrate how women used these descriptions to express their experiences of mothering:

I think most mothers would say that is a very common thing that you *give up part of yourself* to raise that child or your children. (FG1)

I feel like I have sacrificed a lot of myself and I wouldn’t trade it for the world, but I think that is what mothers do and *giving up you* to raise a baby. (FG4)

I want to be young enough when they are grown to enjoy my life because I knew I would be *putting my life on hold* basically to raise them and then I could *get on with my life*. (FG4)

The next passage shows Susan’s feelings of being fragmented as she is “giving parts of herself away:”

There are times when I just feel I have been run ragged. You are just *giving parts of yourself away* constantly, everybody is asking for parts of you and the kids are asking for the biggest part. (Susan)

These other passages illustrate women’s descriptions of feeling torn about the conflicting emotions of mothering:

You are constantly *torn* between what you should be doing for yourself because you need to take time for yourself but that is the last thing that happens. (FG2)

...partly like my desire to do well in teaching and have a good career. Things like publishing and going on to get a doctorate, those things I am somewhat interested in. But at the same time, I think it is very important to be with Matthew and do things with him, and have other children too. And I don’t see those as very compatible goals at least at this time. This is what I am *torn* about....That’s why I have this feeling of being *torn* between wanting to do well and have a nice career and wanting to be home with my son and even having other children

[When asked to talk about how often she struggles with these feelings, she says] I would say at least weekly, sometimes daily. (Shelly)

[Describing the '90s generation of mothers] The word that comes to mind is *tormented* and I know that is a little dramatic. I think that my stereotypic '80s woman was excited to go out and work and career was it, and now in the '90s we think that maybe that isn't the best for the kids. But I have to work to have this house and just really *torn*. (FG3)

Feeling like a person

The third pattern related to language usage was related to times they described their feelings of self, specifically related to wanting to feel like a person or needing to feel "human." This was related both to how they perceive society values mothers – "You don't feel as though they see you as important as a *human*" (FG2); to how constant caregiving of their children makes them feel – "She [my daughter] just would never get that far away from me. That was exhausting in the first place. She was *sucking the life out of me*" (Whitney). The following passages are rather poignant examples of the words women chose to describe their "humanness:"

It [working part time] is just becoming more and more acceptable to where moms get just enough of an outlet to be *human*. (FG1)

It was by far the most emotional and hardest pregnancy, because I felt *branded* or something because I was going over the your two child, a dog and cat and picket fence and you know what was I doing having a third? (FG1)

[When asked how she feels this research will benefit others] I think it will let people know that *we are people* and that we have feelings and that we have thoughts and needs and that they need to be met otherwise society goes crashing. So I think just putting a face, a name, or a voice on motherhood would help. (Rachel)

While this theme seems to be somewhat different or perhaps out of place from the other themes, there are some important perceptions one can glean from examining this data. In Marshall's (1991) work on the social construction of motherhood, the author writes

Discourse analysis takes language as the site for the investigation of social phenomenon. Using this approach, language is not taken as a straightforward description or reflection of the social world, but as actively constructing versions of the social world. Given that the same phenomenon could be described in a number of ways, discourse analysis examines social texts, both spoken and written to see which linguistic constructions are selected and which are omitted. (pp. 67-68)

One example of the way the use of language shapes perceptions of a phenomenon can be seen through the language commonly used in pregnancy and childbirth. Pregnancy has come to be seen as a medical condition needing to be within the control of obstetric doctors and other experts rather than a natural human condition. Also related to childbirth, we frequently see the phrase, “which doctor *delivered* the baby” inferring again that the act of giving birth is out of the woman’s control and the credit given instead to the *delivering* doctor. While I am choosing not to spend a significant amount of discussion related to this theme, it certainly offers some unique insight into women’s experiences as mothers.

The value of mothering

A very significant theme that emerged from this study was the lack of value for mothering. Within this theme, several sub-themes emerged – (a) lack of value at the societal level, (b) mothering not valued as “work,” (c) issues specific to employed mothers, (d) issues specific to stay-home mothers, (e) gender stereotypes, and (f) how mothers define their feelings about the value of mothering.

Lack of value at the societal level

While most of the women in the study agreed that mothering is something most would say they value, overall cultural attitudes and practices do not reflect a true value for mothering. For instance, Debra commented on why she thinks this research study will offer a valuable contribution to the field. Debra is a professor herself and therefore familiar with the impact of significant research on societal attitudes. She said

I think research like this also makes mothering a serious object of study, which it should be. It is something that society supposedly values. Doing a little bit on the history of women, they say they can document men’s lives but they can’t document women’s lives because the work they engage in is just invisible. Something disappears ---- children grow up, they die, there is nothing left of that and I kind of thought that was interesting. I think when more people write and work on mothering and child care issues; it is going to gain a place in the academy if you want. (Debra)

Susan also commented on the general lack of value for mothering. The next rather long passage highlights several important points: a) a lack of value for mothers who choose to stay home, b) a lack of value for women who choose to work part time, and c) a lack of value for the work involved with “mothering.” Susan said

I don't think it is the perceived lack of value, it is a whole different thing. I think the perceived lack of value of mothering is more pervasive than that... It is like you see people and I hear people say, “Oh, they are just a stay-at-home mom;” or husbands or fathers that don't understand why the house isn't clean. It is like, okay, wait a minute. You stay home all day and see how much you get done. Because I can guarantee my husband when I was gone for a weekend had those kids at McDonalds every night for dinner. My daughter thinks he can't cook. It is this whole idea that if you are at home, you are not doing anything. If you are busy playing with the kids, you should be doing something like cleaning the house. And what people who have never been at home or done any of that don't understand is that you can clean the house and in ten minutes it looks like you haven't done a thing to it all day. There is a real lack of people valuing it. Work places don't give you the credit that you need. There are so many studies that talk about how more productive parents are when there is on-site child care and just knowing that there is good child care. But society hasn't taken it to heart. They haven't accepted the fact that if they are going to work then there needs to be help. It is like they drop you because you decided to do that so you have to figure out how it is going to work. For me it has worked out by sacrificing my job. I work part time, I don't have any benefits, I don't build up seniority, and I don't have the same respect as someone that is working full time. (Susan)

Related to the work of caregiving, Ferguson (1991) in talking about the realities of caregiving, pointed out the emotional consequences of doing what she called “invisible” work. She wrote that not being acknowledged while at the same time receiving messages such as children need full-time care and it is a noble activity leads many mothers to experience “the undervaluing of an important part of their life” (p. 84). Looking at the lack of value for mothering in general, the next passage highlights an overall lack of value for those who care for children. Holly attributes the overall lack of value for mothering related to society's preoccupation with money and more “tangible things.”

I agree that the perceived view [lack of value for mothering] is how it is and it is terribly wrong. I think that in general people that care for children are grossly undervalued whether they are daycare provider or mother or any of those. It is awful. Probably because the job you do as a mother doesn't really show good or bad and the time that people start to judge them is so long. ... Money and income are tangible things and perhaps once a child is older, maybe that is the tangible result from the investment you put into your kids when you stay home. I suppose for a lot of people if you are not bringing money into the equation, maybe it is not looked at as income, which is foolish. (Holly)

Mothering not valued as “work”

Related to the previous quotation about the importance of money and income, there was an overall consensus that a mother’s work is not valued because it doesn’t meet the traditional production standards set by society. Daniels (1987) recognized the importance of financial compensation to make work seem valuable. She wrote, “A real pressure underlying the work of the homemaker is lack of validation” (p. 407). She goes on to write

The lack of validation attendant upon women’s work in the family, in volunteer, and in women’s occupations affects the definitions women make of their own efforts” (p. 408). The following passage illustrates Shelly’s struggle to feel that her day has been successful. Shelly talked about going to the doctor and being diagnosed with stress headaches during the first few months after the birth of her child and during the time that she was home full time with him. Interestingly, in the first part of the passage, she talked about her surprise at this diagnosis because she felt that she was at home “not doing anything, except” caring for her child which in her eyes was not enough “work” to produce stress headaches. In the latter part of the passage she really offered insight to the meanings behind why a mother’s work is not valued. She said

I was a little surprised because here I am at home and I’m not doing anything except running the house and taking care of Matthew which doesn’t seem stressful yet here I was having stress headaches and I was thinking about that and I think it was that some of the emotional things that were going on like taking care of feeding and changing his diaper that kind of thing. It was rather stressful and I wanted to be out doing other things where I could say yes, I finished this paper or I did this course or have something to show for my time. At home you’re just there and Alan [her husband] comes home at the end of the day and it doesn’t look like we’ve done anything but make the house a wreck. Or you can only say, I did a batch of laundry. I guess part of it was my way of defining my day by what I got done – things that you could count on your fingers. Staying home with Matthew you can’t really count it like that. I think that was the emotional stress I was feeling there. It was a total change in how I defined what I did in a day... It’s kind of how society defines success – they put value on people because of the things they do rather than who they are. (Shelly)

Related to seeing (or not seeing) caregiving as work, several other mothers made comments related to feelings of doing nothing all day when they are home with their children. This is illustrated in the following quotations.

I have a big list and, "so what did you do today" is the first thing that he says when he comes in. Well I did nothing. It may feel or look like you've done nothing but your whole day is full. (FG2)

I think to myself, I can't even do the simplest things, because I feel like I've done nothing but I've had no time to myself... Even during my maternity leave, towards the end when I was more active and he was more alert during the day, I felt that I've done nothing and had no time for myself during the day. At that time, Steve would come home and say, what did you do today? I'd say don't even talk to me, I'm worn out. I did laundry and....it was difficult for me when I was home because I felt like there wasn't enough to show what I had done during the day and it is difficult being at work just because of all of the work you do there and then all of the work that I feel that I have to get done at home at night. (FG2)

I look at my desk and my list and nothing got done. But when you are at work you are getting paid for it and it's part of the job and just the day you had, but when it happens at home and people say what did you do all day... [related to mothers feeling like they did nothing all day at home] When you are home with your kids, child care is a full-time job. It is not like you are donating your time. (Holly)

The next passage really speaks to the lack of value for mothering based on societal definitions of work. When asked to comment on why she feels there is a lack of value for mothering, Shelly said

Probably because of the prevailing idea that the woman should be working and if she is not, if she doesn't have a job outside the home, it's not really work. She is working at home but it is not really work... Why do mothers have to go to work, why can't they stay home with their children and be more support for the mothers staying home than giving the support for mothers going to work? That to me says mothering isn't valued. (Shelly)

Several researchers, such as DeVault (1991) discuss the contradictions inherent in the past with considering "work" performed within the home sphere as actual "work." DeVault writes

Perhaps the most important, individuals learn that the family should be a place for emotional expression rather than work, that it should be a respite from work; these shared expectations of family life provide an interpretive frame that allows the work done to meet those expectations to remain hidden. (p. 5)

This applies to women's work of mothering as well in that women are expected to provide for children's basic needs and nurture children's intellectual, social, and emotional development, thus

because women are expected to complete these tasks, the work done to meet those expectations remains, as DeVault writes, hidden.

Issues specific to employed mothers

Several mothers commented about pressures they receive from their workplaces because of choices they have made related to mothering. Sometimes the pressures are related to their choice to work part time as evident in the following passage:

Even I work part time and I feel guilty. The first whole year I worked part time I felt guilty. Every time I left the office because people would go "oh you get to leave now. What are you going to do all afternoon," and I had made it clear that people could call me at home if there was problems and I would have people call me, "Oh did I wake you up?" I'm like, "Wake me up. Come on. My daughter is down and I'm scrubbing the floor and trying to do something," and people are like "what do you do all afternoon while she's sleeping?"...I got constantly, "Wow it would be so nice to leave at only part time and I just say, "I get paid part time you understand that too." (FG1)

Sometimes the pressure is related to the number of children a woman decides to have as evident in this passage:

From the university perspective, being a professor. It's like when you have that first kids it's like uh that's okay you can have more. The second baby is like you are really pushing it and the third kids is like you know you are not serious. (Debra)

Other times it is pressures related to trying to balance a career and motherhood at the same time as illustrated in this passage:

I heard someone famous say the idea of having it all is just a total myth. This whole idea of the woman being able to have the big career, have the wonderful family, is just a myth. Something has to give. A lot of it is your priorities and you decide which part gives, whether it is the kids or the job. I think in some way I am kind of living that too. I don't have a big career, I am not on the career track or anything like that and sometimes it bothers me and then I sit back and say, you know, I have the kids and that is more important than a career. I can try to do that later. (Susan)

And other times it is just a general lack of value mothers feel from their workplaces:

I think it would be neat because people are going to keep having families so it would be neat if the professional community would consider it more of a profession. Not that we have to get paid for it, but just that you are doing a valuable job. (Brenda)

While women have gained a place in the career world, often times their roles in the domestic sphere have not changed to accommodate their new schedules – juggling home priorities and work priorities. DeVault (1991) talks about the problems this brings for women – trying to be in the outside world (i.e. careers) and tensions from maintaining home and mother duties. While she feels individuals find ways to adjust, it doesn't solve the root issues. She asks, "Will the pressures of adjustment fuel a return to traditional patterns or will this women's movement generate lasting changes?" (p. 3).

Issues specific to stay-home mothers

While mothers in the employment force seem to face a lack of value for their mothering and often sacrifice various aspects of their professionalism and careers, there also seems to be a pervasive lack of value for mothers who choose to stay home. This was very evident in conversations with the mothers in this study. This first comment highlights the contradictions both mothers who are employed and those who choose to stay home face.

I know earlier we talked about the whole-perceived lack of value for mothering, it is like one side gives women who work and are mothers, they don't give them very much value. Then other people don't give women who decide to stay home very much value either. And they are just as important. (Susan)

Several mothers felt that there is a shift back to more women either choosing to work part time or choosing to stay home. For example, the following quotation highlights a shift toward part-time work.

It would be nice to see, I mean like you were saying you see more people going part time and I think it is getting a little bit more acceptable. I wouldn't say it is acceptable yet but...(FG1)

Several mothers who stay home commented that they often talk with employed mothers who would like to stay home. The following passages illustrate just a few of those comments:

When I started to stay home I had a lot of people say what do you do all day? Now I get a lot more people saying I wish I could do that. (FG4)

When I first started staying home I had more people saying things like, What are you going to do all day. I can't even imagine staying home all day. Now, I get more people saying I wish I could do that. I think it has just changed in the last five years, how women look at it. I think women who went to college at the same time I did and now they are into their careers, and now they have kids and now they wish they could stay home, but we have a mortgage and two cars and I can't stay home. They look at it as they can't stay home and I don't really look

at it that way [I asked, "What do you think caused that shift?"] – I think just reality. I don't think there is any such thing as a woman who can do it all. I think that you go to college and you have this glorified idea of what it is going to be, and think real highly of yourself, and think you are going to do this and that, and change the world and you are really naive. And then you get into it and you start having kids and I think when reality sets in you realize you can't do everything. I don't think anybody is failing miserably, but I see so many women who do work during the day who would give anything to be able to stay home...I think more often than not, I run into moms who say they wish they could stay home. (Whitney)

Rachel, who is currently employed full time, commented about her personal desire to stay home. She said related to her feelings about the value of mothering:

Actually, I think it has somewhat changed since the focus group. At least it has in my eyes...I think society as a whole is starting to look at mothering and parenting in a different light saying hey it is becoming more important to be a parent or a mother...myself, I long to stay home so I think there is more of a need there now. (Rachel)

While several mothers commented about feeling very confident in their decision to stay home, they do not always receive positive acceptance from others related to this decision. In fact, several talked about feeling inferior because of their decision to stay home. Three women in particular talked about negative reactions they have perceived from others when they say they stay home with their children. These women said, respectively:

There have been a lot of people when I say that I stay home, that I think that some people almost think that is a bad thing...I don't think he is lacking in anything because I stay home with him, but there is a lot of people that I've gotten that feeling from...I was just surprised when I found a lot of people who would think that it is almost bad that I stay home. (FG2)

I think sometimes when you tell people you stay home and you have kids it is almost like they are going, that's it? I think they are waiting for the rest of the story. (FG3)

Being home I feel sometimes the minority because when someone asks me what I do at home, I say I raise a family....I thought I don't receive an income but I do earn it. I don't think it is well received sometimes. (FG3)

The next two passages show examples of specific situations when mothers were made to feel that they were not as important because of the choice they made to stay home. The first situation offers an example of a woman, Terri, who feels very confident with her decision to stay home. Terri has a 4-year marketing degree and held a high-level position in a company for 10 years before

choosing to stay home full time. She offered an example when she faced negativity based on that decision.

I am extremely proud to be able to stay home. And I can understand some people saying that society looks down on you. I think I would maybe have felt that way if I had become a mother at 22 and had not been out in the career world, but now I can look them straight in the eye. I'll give you an example – I was at a Catholic conference and I was in the elevator and this woman was going on and on about how totally deprived women were at home and how basically we are these little wishy-washy people others step on. I finally looked at her and said, "Excuse me, I have been a professional for ten years but I choose to stay home." ... But if I had never been in the career world, I might feel like what did I miss. I might feel a little inadequate. In my case, I have been there, done that. Now I have chose to do this and am very comfortable with it. (Terri)

The second passage offers an example of how another mother, Brenda, was passed by for conversation once others learned that she did "nothing more" than stay at home. She said

I remember when I'd tell people that I'd like to have kids and stay at home, they'd say, "that's it?" like that is all you want to do. So that was kind of interesting. I guess with our church, we have a lot of friends from church, so the majority of the people stay at home. So from that standpoint it is well taken, I have a good support system from friends, but you do find people every once in a while, when you tell them you stay home, they kind of go, "Oh!" I remember when my husband worked for an accounting firm in Des Moines and we would go to the Christmas party and it was a big deal and people would start talking. A lot of them were dual income families and when you started talking to them, as soon as you told them you stayed home, they were looking for someone else to talk to. Like I would have nothing worth saying. (Brenda)

The last passage related to women's feelings about staying home is reflected in their dialogue describing the '90s generation of mothers. They said

The word that comes to mind is tormented and I know that is a little dramatic. I think that the stereotypic '80s woman was excited to go out and work and career was it and now in the '90s we think that maybe that isn't the best for the kids. But I have to work to have this house and just really torn.

Yeah, they proved it in the '80s and now they have calmed back down and come back to reality.

That's what I was going to say. The '80s had everyone so convinced you could bring home the bacon and have it all. I remember in college we talked about that and I thought who would want that. It wasn't working. I think that women in some respects realize that can't always be. I have to do what is best for my family.

Yeah, but I see the government saying we have to make daycare more feasible and do this and I think maybe we need to make it more feasible that a parent can stay home, but you

don't hear that and sometimes you are afraid to express that. [Lots of agreement from the group!] (FG3)

Gender stereotypes

Related to an overall lack of value for mothering, as one would suspect, there are several gender stereotypes that come into play. Several comments were made related to this. The following passages highlight just a few:

High-powered career is big money. That is what counts. Why is that what counts? Because that is what men think. We either establish our own values and buy into that and I can't buy into that. (Debra)

I don't think it will ever get to the point where emotionally fathers and mothers are the same. I think roles are changing, but emotionally it is still the same (Rachel)

I would like to think that we are moving into a more co-parenting thing. As opposed to when women have to do it all. Why is it that we think we have to do it all? I hope we are moving away from that... [Someone interjects.] I think that is going to focus more toward the dad [interject] as it should be. They have just as much investment to the household as the mom does. (FG4)

Related to the father's involvement in parenting, Whitney made an interesting comment related to how people notice fathers spending time with their children and think "how sweet" that is, yet they do not notice the moms doing the same things, only the "bad" mothers. Interestingly, another mother, Susan, in a later interview commented how she notices dads in the parks and thinks that is really neat. I think this shows that many women buy into that stereotype as well. Notice these two passages:

You don't stop and say, look at that mom with her kids. You don't notice it. But you notice the dads with their kids and you notice the moms treating their kids bad. But you don't notice the good moms. (Whitney)

I love when I see dads out walking the kids in a stroller and I don't know if I was too young to catch it, but I don't remember that when I was growing up. I don't remember seeing dads out walking the kids in a stroller by themselves or doing stuff by themselves. I think we have come a ways, but we are still the first string, we are still the first line. (Susan)

Debra talked about how she "buys into" the gender stereotypes even though her husband is a very capable father and provides wonderful care to their children. She said

I guess in part, I am not saying all day care is bad, but I think if you can possibly swing having a parent at home, that is wonderful. My husband stays home most of the times with the kids. That should be enough, that should be good, but the message and I don't know if it comes from external or internal, but the message is that I should be the one to stay home. The house is relative clean, the kids are happy, [inaudible-----] My daughter completely adores her dad, she loves him. They are very content, they are happy, so I don't know why I constantly feel like there is something wrong, that I should be home. (Debra)

Daniels (1987) discussed how gender stereotypes, specifically beliefs that activities of nurturing, comforting, encouraging, or facilitating interaction are linked to women's natural abilities, lead people to believe that these activities are not learned or skilled, but "only the expression the character or style of women in general" (p. 408). Based on the following dialogue, there seems to be a deep level of resentment among the mothers as they discuss how traditional gender roles have affected their experience.

You see until men change...the kind of status quo or reality in which we work is really from a male vantage point.

Oh absolutely!

You know they're the ones that make the decision and have everything set up, the way we interact at work, the way the office is supposed to look, the way you're supposed to be there at 9 and leave at 6 or whatever.

The way you're supposed to dress.

Yeah, these people have wives that take care of them.

Yeah they have no errands, they [their wives] do all the errands for them.

That's right, they don't have to worry.

We get the kids to daycare. (FG1)

The following comment shows a certain level of resentment as well. This mother said

I think it is a female quality about the guilt and how we have to be the ones to be there. We are married to men and I would say that 80% of men need a mother as well. We marry men and they don't think ahead and so when we feel guilty as mothers, it sometimes is not fair. (FG4)

Mothers' definitions of mothering

The final section related to the lack of value for mothering centers around mothers' feelings of mothering as (a) something that is worthy of value, (b) descriptions of the "wonderful" aspects of mothering, and (c) mothers' roles in changing perceptions.

Something worthy of value. Related to mothers' feelings of mothering as something to be valued, the following passages illustrate this point:

I would hope it [this research] would also help people who are not mothers to realize it is not an easy job and that it is a very challenging job and that people choose things. And I am not just saying stay at home, but we choose to be a mom! (Terri)

[Related to value of mothering] I think it is coming back that way a little bit...I don't know if it is because a lot people are waiting until they are a little later in life...I don't know if that is some of it. That they have been out long enough to have a career and have gotten into parenting and realized that it is just awesome. I think that is changing a little bit. I think some people have regrets, thinking they didn't make the right choice. Like I said, this is a very personal choice for everyone. In talking to my parents and grandparents, they said that the kids are really at home such a short time compared to the whole expanse of their life. This is just a fraction of their life and everyone you talk to that their kids are grown, they tell you to savor every moment, enjoy all of it. And sometimes, when you have three sick kids, I think yeah, I'm savoring this moment. I think that is very true and I hope it is coming back that way. Because it is definitely the hardest job I have ever had, and the longest hours, and no pay. (Brenda)

I just wanted to say it is a very important thing to be a mom – the idea that how you are raising your child has a lasting effect when they grow up. It is very important (FG2)

"Wonderful" aspects of mothering. Several mothers described various aspects of mothering that make it a wonderful part of their lives and a part that the overall joys overshadow the burdens. One mother described being a mother as "the best job" (FG3). Rachel talked about rewards that make it "worth it" and Debra talked about the legacy our children are to us. These comments are highlighted in the following passages:

I think it is okay to let them know but also let them know they will be rewarded. That it is not all negative. Yes, your life is going to change, and some of your dreams may not be realized or may be forgotten, and let them know it is not an easy road, but that it is worth it. (Rachel)

I really think having children is a privilege. They are our legacy. When you have children you feel you are contributing something positive to the world. You try to make the world a

better place. You think you have certain values and talents and you would like those to be passed on and so you have children. Also, if you love a person, you want to have children with that person. It is just incredible. You learn so much about yourself when you have kids. You watch them grow, you watch them learn, just watching them acquire linguistic skills is amazing. It gives you another way of looking at life. When you look at things from your child's perspective, you look at things in a completely different light. As you do grow old and cynical, they are new to everything...they keep you young, they teach you life in a different way. (Debra)

Mothers' roles in changing perceptions. The last two passages show what two women feel can be done to raise the value that mothers are given in our society. Jodi talked about the need to educate women and Whitney talked about the need for mothers to appreciate and value themselves first. The respective passages follow:

I think to educate mothers that they can give up some of that control. They can pass it on to the father, even though I think women have the natural instinct to be a mother, because I think we mother our husbands as well. It is just an instinct. You just take care – women have that role. I think in educating professionals that mothers don't need to have all the control. (Jodi)

I don't think we can march on Washington D.C. and say, "appreciate us". I think it is us, we are just going to have to decide this is an important thing and start treating it that way instead of, like you said, you don't give moms credit. They get the shaft if the kid turns out bad, but the moms don't get the credit. I think we need to start giving ourselves credit... Relying on ourselves or other moms that we are going to do a good job. I don't think it will ever be valued if we don't value it. I don't think it has to do with society, because society includes us and I think that is where it has to start. You can't demand respect from someone else until you respect yourself. (Whitney)

Ways this research will benefit others

During individual interviews, one of the questions the women were asked to comment on was the following: "How will this research benefit others, both mothers and professionals working with mothers?" Answers drawn from this question are the primary focus of this section, however, women offered much information about what they need, which essentially is a benefit of this research, throughout both focus groups and interviews. Primarily women talked about (a) a need for support both formally and informally in their daily mothering experiences, (b) obstacles to accessing support, (c) the need for awareness of what issues mothers face on a daily basis, and (d) the need for validation

and recognition for their roles as mothers. Rachel, as already previously quoted, said this, which highlights the importance of this research:

I think it [this research] will let people know that we are people and that we have feelings and that we have thoughts and needs and that they need to be met, otherwise society goes crashing. So I think just putting a face, a name, or a voice on motherhood would help. (Rachel)

Two other key quotations that highlight the importance of this research are the following:

I thought the focus group was great and I just liked talking to other people and hearing what they had to say. And just knowing that others are doing the same things I was doing. Sometimes you just feel like you are adrift. You are just sort of doing this and you are stumbling through it and you feel like you know you learn from trial and error and a lot of the guilty feelings come in, thinking am I doing this right. Should I have not done that, should I not have yelled at them? In the focus group I heard a lot of the same things I felt so in some ways it was reassuring. (Susan)

I think it's needed and I was interested when you called just because it seems like it is always the effect it has on the child, rather than something to help mothers. It is always, okay, what is going to happen to the kids or what is the spouse relationship. So I think that is why I was intrigued. Just the fact that it is a way you can benefit mothers. I think moms are always feeling that they could use that little boost.... (Brenda)

The need for support

The mothers in the study felt this research can benefit mothers by making known the issues mothers face, which they feel will help in gaining increased support for mothers. The next two sections show women's need for support in their mothering roles through both informal support and formal support. Another section offers information about the obstacles mothers face in getting support.

The need for informal support. In the first passage, women in the third focus group talked about their neighborhoods and how there doesn't seem to be a lot of other moms to network with, specifically related to "stay-home" moms.

We lived in a subdivision and I was it [the only stay home mom]. There is not a lot in our neighborhood now. (FG3)

In the second passage, Whitney shared her future wishes for her daughters. Her comment about motherhood being lonely says something about women's need for support in their mothering roles.

I want them to have close friendships. That is real important. I really want that for them when they go into being a mom, because being a mom can be really lonely if you don't have that. (Whitney)

The third passage shows the need for women to be prepared for the demands of parenting.

Also, you know the first three months are going to be different and you are sort of prepared for the changes. But then you expect it to calm back down and you get tired and you realize this is permanent. At that point I could have used more support. (Shelly)

This final passage highlights a general need for support of mothers.

I have a sister-in-law (ex now) who left my brother with three kids, a 10-month-old, a two and a half-year-old and a four-year-old. And she just walked away and she is not calling them, she is not having anything to do with them. But in part I think it is because they had no community support, no support group, nobody shared, no close friends with her, and so she thinks "I can't cope, I am not a good mother," or "I am not doing this right, so therefore I am going to walk away from this." Here is obviously an extreme case, but I think if she had had help from her church or community groups that it is okay to feel that way, we are not all perfect and we can all share, maybe she would have stayed. (Debra)

Women need support from various sources, including their employers, neighbors, partners, and extended family; however, women in this study most often talked about their need for support from other mothers. In the first passage, the group discussed why moms tend to pick up a conversation with other moms even in places like Wal-Mart and even if they do not really know the other mother. They said

Cause every mom knows they have a common experience. It's easy to talk to someone you have something in common with... [Someone interjects.] I think it is the support you get. It is comforting knowing that at age 7 they will be doing this and I am not doing something wrong. (FG2)

The second passage shows women's need for "outside contact" to feel supported.

That helps me get replenished, if I can have that adult conversation. Sometimes when the kids are napping, I'll call a friend and I'll just feel like I am talking their ear off. It's just like I have been home all day and haven't had any outside contact. (Brenda)

Whitney talked about her transition to motherhood a little over ten years ago. She shared that she took a different path than many of her friends and therefore was left without much support during her early years as a mother. When asked what would have helped ease her transition, she responded

At my age, having more friends who were mothers. I was 22 and nobody my age that I hung around with had kids. I was the only one who was married. I think the social relationships would have helped me, because my friends didn't understand why I wanted to be home with my child. They were like you are going to college; you are supposed to have a career. That was hard for me. Really I think having groups, informal meetings of other mothers is really important. I really think it is easy to become isolated after having a new baby. (Whitney)

Debra talked about her desire to have more support from other mothers. She said

I wish there were a group on campus of moms who value and want to talk about mothers. A lot of people don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about being a mom and trying to combine that with job tenure and promotions and expectations. (Debra)

This last passage, related to women's need for networking with other mothers, shows how Holly realized through her participation in the focus group that mothers share many of the same fears and frustrations whether they are employed or not. She said

I think that just knowing the differences aren't there [between working and stay home]. After the focus group I was surprised to hear that there weren't so many differences and that there were women who were total career track that are now a full-time stay home mom...that her thoughts and fears are really not all that different. That was reassuring to me because I am not around anyone other than other working moms and there are not that many I am around in my field at all. It is nice to know that other people are in the same boat. (Holly)

The need for formal support. In addition to informal support from other mothers, women want more formal ways to get support, whether through community resources, parenting classes, or "mother" groups. In the following passage, Shelly was signed up for a community support program for new mothers called Parent Connection. While this program may have been somewhat helpful, it seemed longer term, and more on-going, support services were needed by Shelly. She said

In my case, she met with me once in the fall and then it was over with before I really reached the point where I needed more support. (Shelly)

Debra talked about a group she is involved with which offers a good source of support for her. She said

In our Catholic church here we have these groups that are called "mom's groups" and it is a ministry of mothers sharing. And they just share in groups and they work from this little book or journal and they talk about different facets of mothering and how it affects you and it has a spiritual component too. Those groups are wonderful because it is basically a sharing group. I think women need to share in order to know they are not the only ones who feel like that. (Debra)

Susan talked about not really knowing what resources are available and wishing there were more parenting classes. In this respect she talked about the stigma associated with taking parenting classes and how people feel they must be doing something wrong if they have to take a class to be a parent. She suggested not calling it a parenting class. She also talked about taking a child development class in college which she felt in the long run really helped her in her parenting role.

...but I don't really know what is out there... [I comment, "So maybe we need more awareness?"] Yes, and making it more acceptable. Making it not so much a parenting class, but maybe just figure how to get groups of mothers together to share common experiences because sometimes even that helps...and then throwing the parenting stuff in there. I honestly think a child development class should be mandatory for everybody... [In college] we both took a child development class, and honestly in many ways that was the best class I took in school. It actually had the most value for me in my real life. Not that I remember everything about it. I remember bits and pieces about it. It really made me feel a little more like I had a handle on things. (Susan)

As Susan talked about the stigma of taking parenting classes, there also seemed to be a stigma associated with needing support groups. Brenda commented about her need for support, "Not necessarily support groups, but a place where you could go for support, where you feel you could be heard." (Brenda) This next passage clearly shows Terri's need for support, especially the last few sentences – "I am not sinking and I am still swimming..."

[Talking about sharing openly with friends]...I think that is important, I think you have to have friends and people you can talk to about it... If a mother does not have a support group, she will have a lot of trouble. And not just [support] from her husband, you need other mothers. Mother groups are great. Any type of mother group you can get into when sharing you go home realizing I am not the only one. It is okay, I am not sinking and I am still swimming. I think that is probably the number one thing. (Terri)

Obstacles to accessing support

Despite the fact that mothers are in need of support, there are several obstacles to gaining that support. Some of these obstacles are (a) lack of networking, (b) the stigma associated with needing help, (c) lack of free time, (d) fear of looking inadequate, and (e) fear of losing one's child.

One obstacle already mentioned was women's lack of networking. Recall the woman's comment about not having other women in her neighborhood to network with. There is also the

obstacle of the stigma associated with needing help, as well as the obstacle of time. As shown earlier, women are often so busy taking care of others' needs that their needs are put on the backburner, including their need for support. The two most obvious obstacles to reaching out for support were the fear of looking inadequate and the fear of losing your child if you are not the "perfect" parent. These two obstacles are illustrated in the passages below. In the first passage one obstacle is the perceived rift between working moms and stay-home moms. This rift between mothers is also evident in the second passage as Whitney talked about the constant comparisons mothers make and the judgments they place on others. First, Holly commented

I think that one of the problems is the thing between working moms and stay home moms. Instead of supporting each other they have to justify their situations maybe just to feel better... (Holly)

In this second passage, Whitney commented that often "other mothers are our worst enemies."

I think a lot of mothers feel so unsure or guilty so much of the time that they are grasping for anything they can feel good about. So if they see somebody doing something they wouldn't do, they think I wouldn't do that, I must be good. I must be a good mom. That is just my experience with other parents. I don't think they intentionally set out to do it, but it is an ego thing. You are always striving to feel good about yourself and sometimes it takes seeing somebody fail, to make you feel better. (Whitney)

There is also women's fear of looking like a failure.

[When asked why she thinks women don't feel comfortable sharing with each other?] I think it is a feeling of failure. You don't want other people to know that things are not just peachy. Again I think it goes back to society. (Rachel)

[This discussion is related to why we tend to have an unrealistic perception that everyone around us is perfect and we are the only ones having a hard time.] I think it is just human nature. You don't feel what they feel. And they aren't telling you what they feel and you don't think the way they think. And it has only happened to you. Something bad happens and you think it only happened to you. You don't realize that you are not the only one until you are told you are not the only one or you can find out on your own that you are not the only one. (Rachel)

In the next passage, Holly was discussing whether mothers really share with each other how hard parenting is. She said

Probably not on a deep down emotional level. I don't think it is considered ok for moms to talk about the fact that they are doubting themselves and they are scared they are not making

the right decisions. It is ok to talk about discipline and more sort of superficial things but not the more emotional...I don't know if it is like if you admit you aren't sure you are doing the right thing...I don't know if it is like showing your insecurities or something too. You are worried about what people will think. (Holly)

Another obstacle for reaching out for support was a surprise. Several women made comments about how easily they felt their children could be taken away from them or charges of abuse could be made if they were not living up the highest parenting standards. The following four quotations highlight that this could be a real barrier that prevents women from reaching out for support.

[Related to why she would not share negative feelings about her child with others even if she needed the support.] Because, let's say your person calls and says those [negative] things, who is to say that co-worker might go to somebody else, who goes to somebody else, who might say, "Go take that kid". That would be the fear – the fear of losing that child. I think that would be why I would not say that. That would be my only reason because I am the type of person that pretty much says it like it is. (Jodi)

We are all afraid of being accused of being an unfit mother or child abuse and all these things that you are so careful what you say because you don't want anyone to perceive that you are not a perfect parent doing a good job. (Debra)

I think in today's society with all the child abuse and neglect and all those things, people, especially mothers are not allowed to have negative feelings toward their kids. I had a really hard time with that with my first child because she wasn't planned. I wasn't ready emotionally either. The pregnancy was awful. After the pregnancy wasn't the best so the little thoughts run through your head; what happens if this happens and what do I do when she won't stop crying. And, she is hungry again and you aren't used to being responsible for somebody else, you start feeling negative towards, not the child but the child's actions to the point where you don't think very nice thoughts. And I think with today's society, you feel guilty and you don't want anyone knowing you think those thoughts because if you do you are a bad person. (Rachel)

You are supposed to be the perfect parent and if you are not, God forbid, somebody call child welfare on you and then you just hope you don't get someone that has had a cranky day and they decide to take your kids away. (Susan)

The need for awareness

In addition to needing increased support, there is also a need for an increased awareness of the issues mothers face, both related to daily experiences and the overall value of mothering. The first passage highlights the need for increased awareness about the value of mothering.

I think maybe it can raise awareness about the fact that mothering doesn't seem to be valued. I don't think it is a conscious thing. Their actions and attitudes do [show it] so maybe just

raising awareness that it is more valuable and hopefully raising the awareness in the business community that is they can accommodate the mothering needs of women it may lead to more productive people. (Holly)

The following passages highlight the need for increased awareness among mothers about the daily struggles of parenting and what to expect.

There is this commonality and sometimes it is just nice getting together with other people and finding out that you are not the only one sitting there getting frustrated or feels this way and feels that way. Sometimes I think that is a big help. When I read different books and find out that other people have the same problems or whatever, it makes you feel more like that you are not alone and that you are not the worst mother in the world. (Susan)

I think that maybe people who are just becoming mothers and have a lot of questions about what should I expect and are getting themselves mentally prepared for being a mother, that this might be very interesting to them – to see what the common struggles and issues are that come out for mothers. (Shelly)

However, the same woman who in the passage above talked about helping mothers get themselves prepared is not comfortable sharing the “realities” of being a mother with someone contemplating motherhood. Shelly said

It would depend on who you are talking to. I can think of some cases where I wouldn't want to scare them away from being a mother, so I wouldn't tell them it's this bad. But the ones that already have children, it's okay to tell them because they already know and can sympathize with you. They will tell you their stories too. For me that is how I think it is. The ones who have children, I would be more honest with them versus the ones that didn't have children. (Shelly)

The need for validation

Finally, women have a need for validation and recognition of their role of being a mother.

Brenda talked about getting the validation from the professional community. She said

I think it would be neat because people are going to keep having families so it would be neat if the professional community would consider it more of a profession. Not that we have to get paid for it, but just that you are doing a valuable job. (Brenda)

Holly talked about her mother-in-law's lack of validation and how this led to later resentment. She said

I've watched my mother-in-law who had kids really young and she stayed home and then went back to high school and college at 40. She still has a lot of resentment like I did this for you towards her kids, not that she doesn't love them but sometimes I can see that. I think she

feels like she did all these things and wants them to appreciate more and understand more. (Holly)

Whitney talked about one of the reasons why she wanted to have a third child. "I think I was starting to feel a little unimportant." (Whitney) Whitney gets validation from her children's dependency on her. As her other two get older she is no longer getting as much recognition from them and apparently not from other sources as well. In this final passage, Terri who stays home with her children talked about how she runs her home like a business and actively seeks the affirmation from her husband. She said

Very, very rarely will I end up a day and feel like I didn't do anything. I will actually write a list for myself in the morning. If you saw it today, you would see: iron, clean toilet, work on the computer, work with Shelby on a lesson. I normally put it down so it is just like I am going to work....And Jay at least listens to me when he comes home for lunch or at dinner and I'll say, "I did two load of laundry today!" Often I say to him that I need his support because you are now the person that I report everything to. And I need you to say, "Oh! Good job!" I don't get it from anybody else. I've talked to him about that before. (Terri)

The final quotation in this section highlights an important step that needs to be made in liberating women from this "ideal" concept of motherhood. It could not be said better than Terri does:

I think what is important is for mothers to know why they don't have to be perfect. To know that we are all struggling to be the best mother we can be. I think that is the biggest thing I have learned from this and in just talking in the focus group and to my other friends. I realize I don't have to be perfect, we are all in it together and we are all struggling with similar stuff....I think a lot of it is just understanding that mothers tend to put a lot on themselves. We need to say, I don't need to put that on me. (Terri)

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how mothering affects women's lives. This research was conducted with a homogeneous group of women – all Caucasian, married, primarily middle-class, and for the most part highly educated. Thus, in order to increase the transferability of the findings, future research needs to focus on exploring similar issues with more diverse groups of mothers.

Major patterns emerged around nine primary themes. These were (a) “maternal” sacrifice, (b) bearing the emotional “labor” of caring for children, (c) pressures/expectations of mothering, (d) mothers' connections to their children, (e) mother/father differences in parenting and the influence of the marital relationship, (f) issues of loss surrounding motherhood, (g) use of strong language, (h) value of mothering, and (i) ways this research will benefit others. To best make sense of this vast amount of data, it is useful to further categorize the nine themes into two main categories: the realities of mothering and the role of outside influences. While each area in and of itself can be an area for further investigation, thus presenting the potential for several smaller studies within the larger study, it seems that understanding the realities of mothering within the context of how outside influences shape this experience is the most relevant for examining the implications of this study.

Many different issues emerged from this data, some areas less familiar for me than others, such as the social use of language and the meanings behind individuals' choice of words as shown in the theme – use of strong language. Because I am specifically interested in parent education, it seems most appropriate to consider the data within the context of what information it holds related to providing better services to mothers (and fathers, too). While this study was specifically focused on mothers, it became very apparent the importance of involving fathers in all aspects of the parent/child relationship.

Looking at the realities of mothering, mothers experience day-to-day emotional exhaustion from sacrificing both basic needs and self-actualizing needs, as well as from the pressures and

expectations surrounding them about how to be “good” mothers. These pressures and expectations are often experienced as contradictory messages coming from a multitude of sources, including family, friends, co-workers, strangers on the street, the media, experts such as doctors, teachers, and child development experts, and from their own personal desires. Often lacking the needed support from their spouses, both in terms of the marital relationship (highlighted in this study by lack of time and privacy with each other) and related to shared parenting needs, this emotional exhaustion intensifies.

On a broader scale, women are coping with the losses brought on by mothering and what they perceive as a lack of value for mothering. Despite these experiences, women described the rewards and gains from mothering to somehow make daily realities and struggles well worthwhile. Mothers were certainly not looking for ways to remove themselves from their mothering experiences. They were, however, in need of understanding, validation, and support.

Although much has been written related to feminist ideologies and feminist theories of motherhood, often, these do not fit at the level of an individual mother’s perspectives. While they serve a purpose in helping us understand why things such as gender or societal and cultural standards influence mothering, they do not necessarily support mothers in their every day lived experiences. Hays (1996) presents her critique of the current “state” of motherhood as “a distanced and apparently cold-hearted stance toward the ideology of socially appropriate child-rearing that many [of the mothers in this book] hold dear” (p. 17). She takes the position that by attempting to remove herself from the emotional intensity of the topic she is better able to critically analyze the “logic of the ideology of intensive mothering, clarify its historical emergence, demonstrate its persistence, and speculate on the reasons it remains so powerful” (p. 17).

Hays (1996) criticizes this ideology of “intensive mothering,” wrongly so in my opinion. Removing herself from the emotional intensity of an issue in a distanced and cold-hearted way in fact fuels emotion for the topic just in a different way. Hays asks, “Why don’t we convince ourselves that children need neither a quantity of time nor ‘quality time’ with their mothers or their fathers?” (p. 5).

This is a concern: children need intense care both from caregivers and parents, and the people who care for children need support and acknowledgment in order to provide high quality care to children. It also denies a body of knowledge that shows that human attachment and connections are very basic to making humans human. My concern in negating parents'/mothers' desire to do this is that it detracts from the voices of mothers and denies the intensity of the feelings they experience in working out their maternal identity.

It seems that while Hays (1996) is attempting to bring women forth from their misguided perceptions of motherhood, she is essentially rewriting their experiences in a way that supports her theories. For example, Hays titles her first sub-heading, "The trouble with Rachel." She describes Rachel as torn between two cultural spheres, one of the woman's work in the home (essentially raising children) and the other of her role in the paid work force. Rather than allowing Rachel's voice to be heard and acknowledging the intensity of her feelings, Hays criticizes Rachel's reliance on the culturally dominant ideology and insinuates that it is the mother, Rachel, who has the troubles, thus subjugating her to a subordinate role in which she cannot voice her own perspective. Hays writes, "Rachel experiences these troubles because she shares with others a particular perspective of those [mothering] demands" (p. 2). This in essence says that because Rachel perceives her mothering role in a certain way, she is bringing trouble on herself. This sounds much like "mother blaming."

While some feminists believe mothering serves to further subordinate women, the women in this study to not readily accept that notion. One mother from the focus groups commented

This women's lib and stuff, we are driving ourselves crazy.... We have created the guilt because we are educated and we can do it and we choose not to do it and then feel guilty that I'm wasting my education. (FG 4)

As Susan Chira (1998) chided women for wanting to work only part time and discussed how patriarchal views and ideologies have caused ingrained gender beliefs in women, to present these ideas to the women in this group would not necessarily be well received. While these ideas may help in understanding why motherhood has gotten to where it is, it does not support women in their daily

experiences. An interesting finding from the current study was that when asked to report what their ideal situation would be, none of the women expressed a desire to work full time. While this could be a repercussion of today's fast-paced lifestyle, it also informs us of how women's experiences fit with the current ideologies, such as the image of the Superwoman – that women want it all. In fact, several women commented about how this stereotype affects their experiences. Two mothers commented

They proved it in the 80s [that you can have it all] and now they have calmed down and come back to reality. [Another mother added.] That's what I was going to say. The 80s had everyone so convinced you could bring home the bacon and have it all. I remember in college we talked about that and I thought who would want that. It wasn't working. I think that women in some respects realize that can't always be. (FG 3).

Another woman commented

I would like to think that we are moving into a more co-parenting thing. As opposed to when women have to do it all. Why is it that we think we have to do it all? I hope we are moving away from that. (FG 4)

Even Debra, who considers herself a feminist, talked about an essence of mothering and struggled with her intense feelings that she should be the one to be home with her children rather than her husband. She made an interesting comment related to what she believes is a difference in parenting between mothers and fathers. She said

The idea of physical connectedness is essential to being a mother, regardless of whether you are a biological or adoptive mom. My husband is an excellent caregiver, is responsive to the children's needs throughout the day and is very affectionate with the kids. Yet, they crave a very close physical connection to me – hugging, holding, snuggling, being 'mothered'.

Theoretical implications

In considering how to best support mothers in their daily experiences, one must consider the complexities of the emotions involved with mothering along with the interactions of various outside influences. Several frameworks within which to understand the realities of mothering and providing a context within which support can occur are an adaptation of Pearlin, Mullan, Semple, and Skaff's (1990) conceptual model of Alzheimer's caregivers' stress (see Figure 1) and Oberman and Josselson's (1996) model of mothering depicting a matrix of tensions from which to understand the

process of mothering. In order to better understand the obstacles in accessing support that mothers face, Maushart's (1999) understanding of what she terms the "mask of motherhood" is useful. Each of the above frameworks will be discussed within the context of what implications this research offers related to mothering. First an overview of how phenomenological research guides this process will be discussed.

Phenomenological approach

Max Van Manen (1990) in his book Researching Lived Experience explores the underlying assumptions of phenomenological research and guides the researcher in designing a phenomenological study. The researcher using a phenomenological approach seeks to understand a certain phenomenon as experienced by the person or group being studied. Van Manen writes, "From a phenomenological point of view, to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings" (p. 5.) He also writes, "A human being is not just something you automatically are, it is also something you must try to be" (p. 5.). This idea brings to light one aspect of this study, that women do not just become mothers, but *being* a mother is something a woman "tries to be." Each mother likely has a conception of what type of mother she is or desires to be. In the present study, Holly discussed that her academic background or career is no longer as important in defining who she is. When asked what things do define who she is, she responded, "definitely how I view myself as a mom...if I feel like I'm doing a good job. That is a big one." She later talked about the emotional exhaustion that "wanting to be the best and wanting to make all the right decisions" related to her mothering capabilities means for her.

From a phenomenological point of view, it is issues such as these that must be acknowledged, specifically of importance because they arise directly from the viewpoint of the person's lived experience. Van Manen (1990) writes

Lived experience is the starting point and end point of phenomenological research. The aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence –

in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful. (p. 36)

The reason I chose to discuss the aims of phenomenological research is to highlight the importance of understanding the findings within context of the mothers' perspectives. Thus, while specific frameworks are offered to provide models of understanding maternal experience, nothing can fully describe or exemplify the diverse experiences of individual mothers.

Caregiving stress model

According to Pearlin et al. (1990), caring for others has two components. The authors distinguish between caring for someone as an affective component and caregiving as the behavioral expression of that care. These authors view caregiving not as a role, but as part of an overall interconnected relationship. They also point out that while in some situations caring and caregiving involve equal exchanges, such as husband/wife or friend/friend, sometimes caring and caregiving involve an "extraordinary and unequally distributed burden" (p. 583). While these authors focus on caring for persons with Alzheimer's disease, their findings can also be applicable to caring for young children, keeping in mind that caring for Alzheimer's patients involves dealing with the finality of life, whereas caring for young children occurs within a context of growth and development.

Pearlin et al. (1990) examined four components of the stress process (see Figure 1). These components were (a) the background and context of stress, (b) the stressors, (c) the mediators of stress, and (d) the outcomes or manifestations of stress. Related to background, the authors considered the age, gender, ethnicity, education level, and occupation of the caregiver. These are also important characteristics to consider in understanding the stresses of mothering. In addition to important demographic characteristics of the mother, such as socioeconomic status and marital status, other characteristics to consider are characteristics of the children, such as ages and number of children, the context or environment within which mothering occurs, employment status, and cultural beliefs and practices.

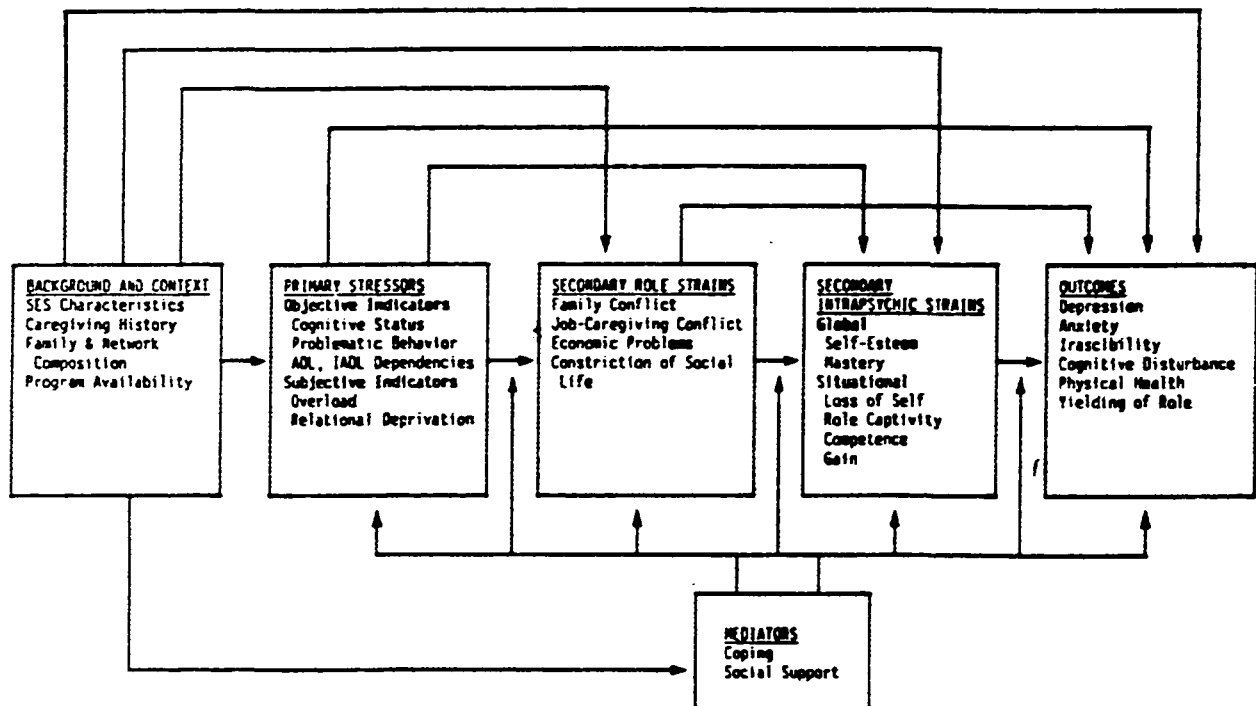


Figure 1. Caregiving stress model (Pearlin et al., 1990)

When examining stressors, Pearlin et al. (1990) considered both primary and secondary stressors. Primary stressors included patient's cognitive ability, the extent of patient's dependency, and the level of patient's problematic behavior. Regarding problematic behavior, the authors write, "The level of vigilance that must be maintained and the 'damage control' that must be exercised to ensure that the patient harms neither himself nor others constitute, from all indications, a formidable stressor (p. 587)." This same level of vigilance is required of people caring for young children. This was discussed by the women in the current study especially within the context of feeling full responsibility for their children. For example, on a very tangible level, one mother talked about how she scopes out the room for any dangerous spots as she enters with her child. This level of responsibility and providing safety and security to a young child requires a high level of vigilance. Other primary stressors were measured as levels of caregiving overload or "burnout" experienced by

the caregiver and level of relational deprivation, meaning the loss of previous closeness in relationship with the patient. Concerning caregiver burnout, the authors write, “The items constituting the measure bespeak not only the level of fatigue felt by caregivers but also the relentlessness and uncompromising nature of its source” (p. 587). Again, these issues are very relevant to mothers. The mothers in this study talked about the high level of emotional exhaustion they feel, as well as the many sacrifices they make of basic needs such as eating a hot meal, having time to go to the bathroom by themselves, getting enough sleep, or having time for their spouses. Also, the developmental level, including cognitive level of a child is important to consider in assessing potential level of stress as is the level of problematic behaviors the child displays. Of course there are differences in the caregiving relationship with children as opposed to Alzheimer’s patients as with children some of these issues are indicators of growth and development, whereas with Alzheimer’s patients these same issues are indicators of demise.

Secondary stressors were divided into two categories: secondary role strains, measured by family conflict, job-caregiving conflict, economic problems, and constriction of social life and secondary intrapsychic strains, considered by measures of self-concept and overall psychological states. For secondary role strains, Pearlin et al. (1990) considered the impact of the marital relationship as well as career constraints on the caregiving relationship. They also considered the extent to which caregivers experienced a decrease in outside activities due to caregiving responsibilities. Regarding intrapsychic strains, the authors examined issues of diminished self-esteem, confidence, and self-concept brought on by overwhelming caregiving responsibilities. They also examined loss of self as a significant issue to consider when conceptualizing their stress model. They wrote, “To the extent that the identity and life of the caregiver has been closely bound to that of the patient, the caregiver may experience a loss of his or her own identity...” (p. 589). This loss may be intensified by loss of outside activities and contacts, which the caregiver previously found enjoyable, and thus used as a form of self-validation. Other factors affecting loss were feelings of

competence in the caregiving role and considerations of the caregiver's personal gain or enrichment experienced through the caregiving relationship. All of the above issues were found to be significant in mothers' lives evident through their discussions of various aspects of their mothering experiences. For example, issues of loss seemed to be prevalent in the mothers' lives and issues within the marital relationship as well as job pressures seemed to influence their mothering experiences. Several mothers talked about the outside pressures they face related to the mothering role, which serve to strengthen or more often diminish their feelings of self-competency in their caregiving roles.

The mediators of stress Pearlin et al. (1990) found most important were related to the caregiver's coping skills and levels of social support. They found that these mediators functioned directly by lessening the intensity of the stressors and indirectly by blocking the effect of both primary and secondary stressors. Coping was measured on three separate levels: (a) the management of the situation giving rise to stress; (b) management of the meaning of the situation such that threat of stress is reduced; and (c) management of the symptoms that results from the various stressors. Social support was measured both in terms of expressive and instrumental support. In conclusion, Pearlin et al. (1990) write

We believe that it is useful to think of caregiver stress not as an event or as a unitary phenomenon. It is, instead, a mix of circumstances, experiences, responses, and resources that vary considerably among caregivers and that, consequently, vary in their impact on caregivers' health and behavior. (p. 591)

Based on the results of the present study, this model of caregiving stress is quite applicable to aid in our understanding of the stresses associated with mothering. When reviewing the items used for measurement of the various components of their model, I found several similarities as discussed by women in this study. A few of these similarities will be shown here. Examples of questions used on their measures that also apply to mothering or caring for children follow:

1. Related to problematic behavior: In the past week, on how many days did you personally have to deal with the following behavior of your (relative)? – keep you up at night, repeat

questions/stories, try to dress the wrong way, have a bowel or bladder accident, cry easily, cling to you or follow you around, become restless or agitated, and become irritable or angry.

2. Related to caregiver overload: ...how much does each statement describe you? – you are exhausted when you go to bed at night, you have more things to do than you can handle, and you don't have time just for yourself.

3. Related to loss of self: ...how much have you lost: a) a sense of who you are and b) an important part of yourself.

4. Related to personal gain: how much have you...become more aware of your inner strength, become more self-confident, grown as a person, and learned to do things you didn't do before?

The implication this theoretical model has for understanding motherhood is that in gaining insight into the interplay of stressors at work in mothers' lives, we can learn how to better support them in significant areas, especially through gaining a better understanding of the mediators of stress. In addition to understanding the stressors in mothers' lives, it is also important to understand how women integrate mothering into their sense of identity. Oberman and Josselson (1996) propose the matrix of tensions model of mothering that considers the various developmental issues mothers face when negotiating the demands of motherhood. A discussion of their model follows.

Matrix of tensions model of mothering

Oberman and Josselson (1996) seek to understand how women integrate maternity into their sense of self. They write, "We suggest mothers struggle to balance themselves amid a set of polarities/tensions and that mothering can be situated within a phenomenological matrix of such tensions" (p. 341). They propose a model that takes into account several different developmental issues faced by mothers. They highlight six central issues: (a) loss of self/expansion of self; (b) omnipotence/liability; (c) life-destroying/life-promoting behavior; (d) maternal isolation/maternal community; (e) cognitive strategies/intuitive responses; and (f) maternal desexualization/maternal

sexualization. While they point out that their model is not exhaustive of all developmental issues that mothers may face, they feel it is a step “in the evolution toward a more comprehensive understanding of mothering” (p. 356). These authors point out that past psychological literature related to mothering has been primarily child-centered, for example how mothers’ behaviors influence children’s development. They write regarding their proposed model

This work lays the foundation for understanding the psychological nature of the maternal experience, but taking this next step requires a shift of focus from the impact of the mother on the child to the impact of the child on the mother. (p. 342)

In examining the developmental issues mothers face, Oberman and Josselson (1996) point out that often mothering is viewed within several dichotomies, such as how mothers describe the intense joy and meaning children bring to their life, while at the same time describing the “daily discomforts” of raising children. They write

Motherhood encompasses a magnitude of experience; it is complex and full of contradictions. Issues of responsibility and guilt, of powerful emotional responses, of isolation, coping strategies, and of the impact of motherhood on sexuality are all part of the transition to motherhood. The day-to-day reality of mothering entails a persistent and often painful juggling of warring emotions. (p. 343)

To give a fairly concise overview of the conceptualization of their model, the following paragraph shows how these authors view the various dichotomies of tensions coexisting in mothers’ lives along a continuum of experience:

We argue...that the experience of mothering is one of dialectical tensions. A change in self-concept may incur a simultaneous sense of loss and self expansion; mothering can confer both maternal power and an immense burden of responsibility; the life-giving aspects of mothering may be undermined by the rage and aggression it inevitably elicits; the isolation it may impose on a woman can coexist with her initiation into a maternal community; the desexualization it may imply may go along with a new element of maternal sexualization. (p. 344)

Several issues discussed within this “matrix of tensions” model of mothering were prevalent within the lives of the mothers of the present study. While several women talked about various types of losses they have experienced through motherhood, they also described the rewards and personal

self-growth experienced through motherhood. Related to this experience, Oberman and Josselson (1996) ask

How does it feel to make the abrupt transition from autonomous person who relates as an individual to friends, partner, and colleagues, to one whose life revolves around the neediness and demands of an infant? How does one go from a lifestyle in which time is one's own to that of a mother who needs to plan fulfillment of all her needs, be they profound or mundane, around the unpredictability of the infant? (p. 346)

Other issues discussed by Oberman and Josselson (1996) and also seemingly prevalent in the lives of the mothers from my study were the feelings of opportunity, also interpreted as power, to shape and mold another human being, while at the same time feeling a tremendous sense of responsibility for their children and all the burdens and challenges this entails. Along another line of discussion, several of the mothers talked about feelings of maternal isolation, while at the same time experiencing a sense of support from other mothers simply because they can relate on the same "maternal" level. According to Sara Ruddick (1989) it is through maternal community that mothers develop maternal thinking. Concerning the idea of maternal thinking, Oberman and Josselson (1996) write, "It also fills a real gap in the literature by highlighting the cognitive work that is a continuous element of mothering..." (p. 353). Within this set of tensions, mothers balance their methods of cognitive thinking in decision making with that of their intuitive responses to children's demands and needs.

While several other examples could be shown, what becomes important in understanding this model are the connections between the various "tensions" or developmental issues. Examples offered by Oberman and Josselson (1996) include how "aggression and anger may lead to the abuse of power, especially when compounded by maternal isolation; [or how] joining a maternal community can contribute to the evolution of cognitive strategies/maternal thinking" (p. 356). In addition to understanding the above connections, the authors point out the importance of understanding how social context affects mothering (e.g., cultural mores, mother's own childhood experiences, and unique characteristics and relationship dynamics between the mother/child dyad).

Examination of all of the discussed issues will yield a better understanding of the maternal experience. Oberman and Josselson (1996) advocate the use of phenomenological research, specifically using in-depth interviewing, to tap into the various conflicts and tensions in maternal development. They also propose that further research should explore individual differences among mothers, for example “are some tensions more prominent for mothers of particular ages or social groups?” (p. 357). “Only with a clearer reading of the phenomenology of the experience of motherhood could we hope to arrive at a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of this aspect of women’s development” (p. 357). The present study highlights several of the same issues Oberman and Josselson propose as significant in understanding maternal development. Further research could examine how specific aspects of the various themes found to be salient in mothers’ lives influence mothers’ individual development.

Obstacles to support: “The mask of motherhood”

Apparent in both the framework for understanding stress and caregiving and in the framework for understanding maternal development more clearly is the need for support of mothers. If mothers are dealing with substantial levels of stress related both to daily caregiving and to the various tensions related to her individual development, awareness and support of her experiences are likely to ease the challenges associated with mothering. As found in this study, women mentioned several obstacles to obtaining the needed level of support, such as lack of networking, stigma associated with needing help, lack of time, and fear of looking inadequate. Susan Maushart (1999) proposes a theory for understanding what hinders mothers from seeking the support they need. The subtitle of her book is “How becoming a mother changes everything and why we pretend it doesn’t.” She discusses how the gap in what women expect from parenting and what they get determines their coping; thus the wider the gap, the worse the coping. She writes that today’s society somewhat prepares women for pregnancy and childbirth by educating them about how to make informed decisions regarding issues such as use of medication during labor, what type of practitioner to chose,

or how to cope with labor pain, yet she feels that the formal knowledge and informal experience stops there and women are left with past ideologies of the “ideal” mother and present images of the mother who has it all to negotiate her own pathway through motherhood.

Maushart (1999) points out how past ideologies, such as children need full-time mothers or a good mother cooks for her family, cause women to feel guilty about the choices they make. She writes

The content of women’s daily realities has changed enormously, as has the nature of the images to which we seek to conform. But the identity crisis – the mismatch between expectation and experience, between what we ought to be feeling and how we do feel, between how we ought to be managing and how we do manage remains as painful and intractable as ever. (p. xi)

Sara Ruddick (1989) also discusses the pain of maternal isolation and need for maternal conversations. She writes, “In a misogynist society that routinely misdescribes or silences the suppressed and developing voices of women, in a competitive society that adores Motherhood but barely notices maternal thinking, it is not surprising that such maternal conversations are as difficult as they are rare” (p. 102). Maushart (1999) points out that the lack of public discourse of mothering is linked to the fact that men do not experience it. She writes that past psychological research has been “more interested in apprehending mothers than in comprehending them” (p. 18). Related to her interest in examining motherhood, Maushart shares that she has received the message that speaking or writing about this topic is considered self-indulgent, boring, and of limited interest. This, she writes, reflects “the feelings of deep unworthiness that women ascribe to their work, a belief that what we do or fail to do doesn’t really matter that much anyway” (p. 16).

Maushart (1999) defines the mask of motherhood as a silence pervading the experiences of mothers, a silence that keeps mothers from sharing the daily realities of their experiences of mothering for fear of looking inadequate or not living up to the “ideal” expectations of the Good Mother. This silence perpetuates the lack of awareness for issues mothers face and allows the myth of the ideal Mother to live on. She writes that we can see this mask of motherhood in:

- The values of a culture that glorifies the ideal of motherhood but takes for granted the work of motherhood, and ignores the experience of motherhood
- Media images of Supermom, complete with briefcase, “serious” hair, and a pair of designer-clad preschoolers scampering happily to help with the dishes
- Child-care manuals that imply that “easy” babies are made, not born, and that an infant’s digestive tract is somehow linked by fiber-optic cable to its mother’s state of mind
- The smugness of the mother at-home who looks with disdain on her sisters in the workforce
- [Or] the smugness of the mother in the workforce who looks with disdain on her sisters at-home (p. 3)

While the mask of motherhood may be a viable coping mechanism, Maushart (1999)

discusses how the mask of motherhood keeps women from speaking the truth and that even though women are bombarded with information about how to parent, the daily realities of parenting are often shrouded in silence. She writes

For the uninitiated, the realities of parenthood and especially motherhood are kept carefully shrouded in silence, disinformation, and outright lies. The conspiracy of silence is real, and it’s documentable. That much is clear. What is much less clear is what purpose the conspiracy serves, and why the vast majority of women participate in it. (p. 5)

An example of this reluctance to share the realities of motherhood is heard in the present study through the words of Shelly. When asked if she believes there is an overall silence among mothers, she said

Yes and no. My first response would be yes because that is my experience in talking to other people. But then I say no because I know I have read some stuff in magazines that say it is not all rosy and you are up all night and things can be difficult....I can remember talking with some friends before I got pregnant and they said having children is great but it really changes your life. It was their way of saying there are some good things about it but at the same time there are a lot of changes and not all of it is good. They didn’t go into details. (Shelly)

While she acknowledges awareness that parenting would not be easy, she does comment too that her friends “didn’t go into details.” This is what Maushart (1999) is talking about when she describes the mask of motherhood and mothers’ unwillingness or discomfort with sharing their experiences. This is shown even stronger as Shelly talked about what types of things she would share about her mothering experiences with others. She said

It would depend on who you are talking to. I can think of some cases where I wouldn't want to scare them from being a mother so I wouldn't tell them it's this bad. But the ones that already have children, it's okay to tell them because they already know and can sympathize with you. They will tell you their stories too. For me that is how I think it is. The ones who have children, I would be more honest with them versus the ones that didn't have children. (Shelly)

Other mothers in the present study also talked about a reluctance to share their mothering experiences with others, sometimes because of fear of looking like failure, other times because they felt alone in the way they were feeling and didn't realize other mothers felt the same things. Related to women's need for support and to be allowed to talk about the "realities" of parenting, a colleague of mine offered a very insightful comment:

Mothers are not supposed to have negative feelings toward their kids. This [expectation] is not realistic and is harmful to society because it puts undue pressure on parents, prevents people from sharing and giving support to other parents, puts attainable ideas of what human parents 'should' be and instills dysfunctional guilt. (Bakken, personal communication, February 09, 2000)

Overall, Maushart (1999) discusses the importance in unveiling this mask of motherhood to better support mothers and to allow a more realistic discourse of mothering to develop. She points out that post feminist motherhood poses the dilemma of how can women be both people and mothers? She points out that typically parenthood has not posed such a transformative life change for men. She cites research that shows that one-half of mothers with children under five years of age experience some type of emotional distress on a consistent basis and that women are five times more likely to be diagnosed with a mental illness in the first year following the birth of their first child than at other times in their lives. These statistics alone point to the need to demystify the experience of motherhood and to open the gates for more realistic expectations and options to be made available to mothers. Maushart writes, "I believe that the mask of motherhood has prevented women from recognizing the power they possess and from acknowledging the necessities to which they must bow as mothers" (p. 242). She also adds, "Our cultural discourse increasingly names motherhood as a 'lifestyle option.' At

one level this is of course true. Yet at another, motherhood lies – today, as it has always been – at the very core of the experience of being female” (p. 241).

Limitations

It is important to consider the limitations of a study when making judgments about how the results may apply across similar groups or other situations. In qualitative research, while results are not considered generalizable to the broader population, the results are typically considered transferable, meaning that through analysis of results for one study, one can have an understanding of the processes and patterns that may apply to similar groups and situations.

When interpreting the findings of this study it is important to consider my perceptions as a researcher and my personal experiences that interact with my understanding of the mothers’ perceptions of their experiences. Giving the reader a personal profile of myself and having independent coders analyze a portion of the data addressed this issue. While it is important to consider the researcher’s own biases, there are also advantages to consider. Because I am a mother, perhaps I was better able to relate to the mothers in this study and make them feel more at ease by sharing some of my personal experiences with them.

Having more information about the participants in this study would allow for a clearer understanding of the themes that emerged. As true with any relationship, there are many factors that influence relationship dynamics and how an individual experiences the relationship. It would be difficult to examine all of these factors within one study; therefore, it is important to consider what information would add to an understanding of the topic. Related to motherhood, not only do individual mother’s perceptions of her situation influence her experience, but there are also influences from children, family of origin, her value system, and childhood background, just to name a few. While several areas of outside influence emerged through this study, it would be interesting to gain more information about other areas of the women’s lives. Certainly women’s own childhood

experiences would be an area for further study. One area especially interesting would be to examine the mother-daughter relationship related both to past experience as well as current influences.

In order to gain this additional information, more in-depth interviewing would need to take place. Seidmann (1991) suggests using a series of three interviews to gain more background information. He has termed the first interview a “focused life history.” This interview allows the participants to describe their past experiences up to the present time, especially as relevant to the topic at hand. The second interview focuses on “the details of experience” as related to the participants’ current experiences relevant to the research topic. According to Seidmann, the third interview is a time for reflection on the meaning. He writes that this interview “addresses the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ [situation] and life” (p. 12). While this approach would be useful in gaining more information about women’s experiences as mothers, due to time and funding constraints this approach was not feasible.

Another potential limitation of the study was that socioeconomic status was based entirely on self-report. Social class was defined by what the mother identified her family as; therefore, this was not based on income, but more on lifestyle choices. However, because I was interested primarily in individual’s perspectives, it may be more important what social class the mother identifies with rather than what income category she would fall under. For example, many graduate students consider themselves middle-class people; however, living exclusively on a student salary might not be considered middle-class based on income levels. While a possible biased assumption, it is likely that because most of the women considered themselves middle-class and given the other average demographic characteristics of the group, such as high education levels, it is likely they would fall within their identified group.

Another significant criticism of this study could be that the results are not representative of women in general. It is important to point out that the results of this study are only applicable to the homogeneous group studied. Significant factors, which would likely influence mothers’ experiences,

include racial background, socioeconomic status, marital status, as well as current parenting stage.

Future research could expand the results of the present study by examining the experiences of other specific groups of mothers to see if similar issues emerge.

Implications for future research

In considering implications for future research, Vangie Bergum (1997) shares her thoughts about how future research might benefit mothers. She writes

The possibility of getting beyond the surface level of the phenomenon to a deeper level than conventional wisdom requires a critical stance. It has action potential, suggested by the questions: How can a world be created to acknowledge the strength of mothers? How can a world be created that supports women with children to live as they desire in their mothering? How does the woman come to know herself as mother in our present healthcare environment?...How does the environment influence the mother's self-knowledge or the value of her own knowledge? How are the outcomes and possibilities raised by such research going to make any difference to the women who give birth, place, adopt, and care for their children? (p. 11)

The questions Bergum poses are certainly important to consider for future research. One area of future research would be to focus on overcoming the limitations of the current study. Related to the lack of representation of mothers in general, future research should focus on more diverse groups of mothers. For example, designing a study using a similar approach but conducted with other groups of women would allow for comparison of groups and perhaps examination of additional issues that might emerge. The support needed by White, middle-class women is likely quite different than that needed by lower-class, single parents. It is important to consider however, that there are likely some common denominators too that might link various groups in significant ways. For example, parent educators have found that it is often helpful to conduct parenting classes with diverse groups of parents to avoid being sidetracked by issues specific to one group and allow the focus to remain on parenting issues. Sometimes more can be learned by focusing not only on the differences among groups, but also by focusing on the similarities.

A second implication for future research is to focus on men's experiences of fatherhood. As pointed out earlier, past research has been overly focused on the mother, creating ideal images and

expectations of motherhood. As previously cited, but worth highlighting again, Baines et al. (1991) point out that when men provide care there is really not a prescribed type of “responsibility” for the person they are caring for, as there seems to be for mothers. Again as previously cited, Ferguson (1991) also points out the lack of emphasis on fathers. She discussed that while the child development literature emphasizes the importance of the mother-child relationship, there are no such prescriptions for paternal bonding. Considering fathers’ experiences of parenting would open the door for more expectations to evolve related to fathers’ equal responsibility for child rearing.

Along the same lines, a third implication for future research is also related to changing the focus from mothers. Rather than just considering mothers’ relationships with children, it seems important to gain a better understanding of the effects on the caregiver when caring for dependent children. While much research has been conducted related to caregiver experiences of those caring for elderly persons, the same issues have not been examined related to those caring for young children. As shown through examination of Pearlin’s et al. (1990) care giving stress model related to Alzheimer’s patients and their caregivers, there are several similarities related to caring for young children. As suggested regarding increased focus on father involvement in rearing children, focus on care giving in general might serve to reduce the level of responsibility expected from mothers.

A final suggestion for future research would be to shift the focus from parenting aspects or child development issues related to mothering to focusing on the whole person. This means to consider not only how issues related to caring for children influence mothers’ development but also to consider how other aspects influence individual development. In an earlier study of teenage mothers Popillion (1997) also found the need to not focus only on the teens’ parenting needs, but also on the whole person, considering the teens’ past histories, current emotional needs, and other significant issues in their lives that interact with their parenting experiences.

In this study several women talked about sacrificing their own needs for those of their children and losing an identity separate from their children. Taking a more holistic approach means

looking at how past experiences, present relationships, and other personal perspectives of their lives interact to shape current experiences related to maternal development. Taking a closer look at these aspects can provide important insights into the complexity of the issue.

Implications for service providers

Highlighting the importance of understanding the implications of what services to provide and how best to provide those services to mothers, Vangie Bergum (1989) writes

To have a child on one's mind is to be a mother. Support for women who are mothers is needed so they can care for their children in the best way possible – through shared parenting with the child's father or other caring adults, supportive child care arrangements, flexible work hours, shared job opportunities, etc. Women need support to mother their children. (p. 156)

The implications to provide this support to mothers can be met through increased awareness and education about the issues mothers face. People who provide services to mothers are typically committed to the best interests of children. While this is certainly necessary it is also necessary to consider the best interests of mothers. This means knowing what things are in mothers' best interests, specifically what things mothers consider most important.

Several implications have already been highlighted in previous sections, specifically related to the theoretical implications. Based on the findings of this study, several important areas for service providers to be more aware of are (a) the need for networking among mothers, (b) the need to focus not only on parenting needs of the mother but also her personal needs, (c) the need for changes in public policies that affect those who care for children, (d) including fathers as equal partners in the parenting experience; and (e) the need to respect mothers' knowledge. It is also important for service providers to be aware of the obstacles for gaining support that mothers perceive. Some of the obstacles discussed by women in this study were lack of networking, the stigma associated with needing help, lack of free time, fear of looking inadequate, and fear of losing one's child.

Several mothers talked about the importance of having other mothers to talk with about both parenting concerns and personal issues. While close friendships can not be formally arranged, perhaps

having more programs available that would facilitate mothers' sharing of their experiences within a safe, supportive environment would promote the development of outside friendships. An important aspect for service providers to consider is that once programs are in place, how to best make them accessible to parents. A few of the mothers in the study mentioned not really knowing what types of services are available in her community. Thus, considering the best way to advertise and attract mothers to programs is one consideration. A second consideration is how to make programs non-threatening to mothers. Mothers in the current study discussed the fear of looking inadequate and the stigma associated with needing help as a few of the obstacles to obtaining support. In this study, Susan talked about how some of those obstacles might be overcome:

[Related to attending parenting classes] And making it more acceptable, making it not so much a parenting class, but maybe just figure how to get groups of mothers together to share common experiences because sometimes even that helps. And then just sort of work the parenting in under disguise. My sister has learned a lot of stuff [from attending parenting classes] and she wasn't a bad parent to start with. Sometimes it makes me feel inadequate. (Susan)

Even within Susan's comment, the fear of looking inadequate and actual feelings of inadequacy are apparent. While there is a need for parents to learn better parenting skills, there is also a need to support parents' efforts in acquiring those skills. This can come from, as Susan put it, "shar[ing] common experiences because sometimes even that helps."

Based on results of this study, one concern for mothers when caring for young children was how to put one's own emotions aside to deal with a young child's. Similar to the Alzheimer's patient's inability to control his/her own emotions, young children are also not able to control their emotions in the same way an adult would or should be able to. This is an important aspect to consider in parent education, as often parents do have the expectation that their children should be able to control their emotions. If parents are given the knowledge and understanding of children's development to know this is an unrealistic expectation, some of the emotional exhaustion experienced might be diminished. However, it is important to acknowledge that even with this information it is not

always possible to suppress human emotions involved in caring for others. Thus, the need for service providers to focus on personal needs of the parents in addition to parenting needs.

Another implication from this study is the need for changes in public policy that affect those who care for children, not only mothers, but childcare workers, teachers, and fathers. These changes involve the availability of affordable, quality daycare, the low level of pay given to child care workers, and support for more flexible work policies.

Specifically related to fathers, changes need to be made in the way the father's role is perceived. Rather than looking at fathers as helpers to mothers, fathers need to be encouraged and expected to take on equal responsibility, not only in direct parenting tasks, such as changing diapers, preparing meals, etc. but also in the more emotional areas, such as taking responsibility for the general well-being of their children. This was highlighted in Lamb's (1995) discussion of the various components of father involvement. He wrote, "The largest discrepancy between paternal and maternal involvement is in the area of responsibility" (p. 25). This is a definite area in need of improvement.

Finally, related to respecting mothers' knowledge, service providers need to make mothers part of the team rather than approaching the situation as experts with knowledge to dispense upon others. While expert knowledge is important in supporting mothers, it is also important to acknowledge that the mother is the one who best knows her child(ren) and that she is the one who must live with her child(ren), making daily decisions about what she feels is best for her child(ren) based both on her awareness of "expert" knowledge and awareness of her own capabilities. Several mothers in the study talked about feeling overwhelmed by the amount of expert information available for today's parents. In the following quotation, Whitney addresses several of the above issues. She said

I think that because there is so much information out there... I think it almost makes us paranoid, knowing that there is this information so you feel obligated to use it and you feel like you are not being a good parent if you don't read the book, if you don't know the latest thing. I think that is a good thing because I think it is a good thing for parents [to know], but I also think having all that information out there and the focus on blaming parents if the kids go

wrong...I think that stress right there makes parents automatically go to a professional instead of using their own judgment because they are just not sure of it. (Whitney)

Jodi also commented about depending on her own knowledge to make decisions related to her child.

She said, "I think sometimes if you put too much thought into it, that is all you do. I think you know what to do but some days you lack the confidence." This comment points to the need to not only help parents learn good parenting practices, but to also help them develop confidence in their own abilities.

CONCLUSION

This research makes an important contribution to our understanding of women's lives. In allowing mothers' voices to be heard, we can begin to understand what types of resources and support will best assist women in their mothering roles. Also, this type of research empowers women. Gitlin and Meyers (1993) in their discussion of their research with teachers write

...the telling of one's story not only gives teachers an opportunity to tell their stories, but more importantly, can release them from a cycle of compliance. When this occurs, they often see value in what they do and know and can use this new confidence to take risks, to look critically at themselves and their world and to protest what is narrow and constraining... (p. 68)

This sense of empowerment applies to the telling of mothers' stories as well. When mothers begin to think critically about their thoughts and feelings and how they are shaped by experiences and the world around them, they begin to better understand themselves and feel freedom to forge their own identities. Using the words of Gitlin and Meyers, they can "see value in what they do and know." As highlighted throughout this text, several women commented about the positive experiences they had from being part of the research. It was apparent that women need more support in their mothering roles. This became especially evident when the women were asked to discuss how they felt this research would benefit others. The overwhelming majority said things related to how they hoped it would create awareness for issues mothers face. A few comments made were "raise awareness to the fact that mothering doesn't seem to be valued," and "feeling that you have good support not necessarily support groups, but a place where you could go for support, where you feel you could be heard." Perhaps the strongest comment about the benefit of this study was this:

It will let people know that we are people and that we have feelings and that we have thoughts and needs and they need to be met...so I think just putting a face, a name, or a voice on motherhood would help. (Rachel)

Hopefully this goal is met and these mothers' experiences will bring to light a deeper understanding of "how mothering affects women's lives."

APPENDIX A

PHONE SCRIPT TO OBTAIN NAMES FROM INITIAL 12 MOTHERS

Script to obtain names from initial 12 mothers

Hi, _____. This is Amy. As you probably know, I am currently working on my dissertation research. For my research topic, I have chosen to focus on the impact of mothering in women's lives. I plan to conduct some discussions with groups of mothers and then do some more in-depth interviewing with individual women. If you would be willing, I would like to ask you for a list of mothers you know who might be willing to participate in this research. While I would love to ask you to be part of the research group, I really need to include women whom I am not acquainted with. If you could take just a few minutes to brainstorm and come up with a list of the mothers you know along with their phone numbers, I would greatly appreciate it. From your list, I would randomly select one name, call her and ask her to participate in the research. Participation is completely voluntary and responses are all confidential so you would not need to feel that I would be putting any pressure on your friends to do this. Actually, most people who participate in research focus groups related to a topic they are interested in report very positive feelings about taking part in the research. Each person would be initially asked to commit only a couple of hours time to the research. They will be served refreshments at the group as well as have a chance to talk with other mothers. As I mentioned some of the women will be asked to participate in further research; however they will certainly be able to decline.

If the person agrees to do a list, explain the following criteria:

As you make your list, the only criteria to keep in mind is to list women who live in the Ames or surrounding communities, as well as only women who have grown up in the United States as I am only looking at this culture rather than doing a cross-cultural study. The final criterion is for you to list women close to your age group or with children similar to the ages of your children. In other words, don't list your mother, grandmother, or neighbor with all grown children, etc. Having the mothers be similar in age and parenting stage will allow the focus group discussions to run more smoothly. The number of children each mother has is not important. Keep in mind women you know who you think might be willing to participate in a group discussion related to mothering.

I would expect your list to be more than 10 but no more than 20 or 25. Just take a few minutes and write down the names that pop into your mind. Don't worry about choosing the women you consider the best moms or the most interesting or unique. You might find it easiest to first just write down the names and then look up the phone numbers later. I can stop by tomorrow or the next day to pick up your list if that is convenient.

Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX B

PHONE SCRIPTS TO INVITE FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Script to invite focus group participants from initial lists

Hi! This is Amy Popillion, _____'s friend. I am calling for _____.

Hi, _____. Do you have a minute? (If not, ask when would be a convenient time to call back). Great, the reason I am calling is to invite you to be a part of a research project I am doing related to women's experiences as mothers. The title of my project is "Mothering into the new millennium: How mothering affects women's lives." I had asked _____ for a list of mothers she knew who might be willing to talk about their mothering experiences with me and your name was one she listed. Do you mind if I tell you just a bit about myself and the project?

I am a graduate student at Iowa State from the Human Development and Family Studies Department. I am currently working on my dissertation project. I am the mother of two sons, a 2-year-old who is my biological son and a 5-year-old foster son who my husband and I are adopting. Because I am a mother and aware of many of the different issues mothers face, I decided it would be interesting to choose motherhood as my research topic. What I plan to do for this research is to conduct focus groups which consist of groups of 6-8 mothers coming together to discuss a series of topics related to mothering. The focus groups will be videotaped for research purposes. The tapes will only be viewed by my major professor and myself. After the research is completed, all tapes will be destroyed. I will conduct focus groups and then do some individual interviews with some of the women from those groups. At this time what I would like to invite you to do is to participate in one of the focus groups. It would involve about a 2-hour time commitment on a Sunday or Tuesday afternoon or evening. Refreshments will be served at the group and I anticipate that it will be a fun time for you to get a chance to talk to other mothers. Participation is completely voluntary and all names and identifying information from the groups will be kept confidential. Does this sound like something you would be interested in or do you have any questions I could answer to help you decide?

If not interested – Okay. To help me out, may I ask why you are not interested at this time? Thanks for your time. Have a nice evening!

If yes – Great, I am really excited about this research and I think it will be a positive experience for the women who participate. Do you mind if I ask you just a few questions about yourself? How many children do you have? What are their ages and gender? Are you currently employed? [If yes] What type of work do you do and approximately how many hours a week do you work? Finally, what is your age?

Because I thought it might help you feel more comfortable if you could have someone you know come along with you, if you could give me the names and numbers of three of your friends who you think would be willing to participate as well, I would like to randomly choose one and invite her to participate. As was true for you, she will not be pressured to participate and certainly can decline my invitation. The only criteria for choosing your three names is that they live in Ames or the surrounding communities, that they have grown up in the United States, and they are close to your age group or have children similar to the ages of your children. The number of children each mother has is not important.

Now, for some technical details – I have four different options for you to choose from for focus group times – Thursday, July 29 from 6:30-8:30; Sunday, August 01 from 3:00-5:00; Sunday, August 01 from 6:30-8:30; or Tuesday, August 03 from 6:30-8:30. Which time works best for you? I will be

sending a letter outlining the things we talked about today and I will plan to do reminder calls to everyone a few days before their group. If you have any questions for me before that time, please feel free to contact me at (515) 232-8318. Also because my project depends on having enough women participating in the groups, if you could call me as much in advance as possible should you not be able to attend I would greatly appreciate it. Of course if something comes up last minute, just give me a call and let me know. You are always free to stop participation in the study.

May I get your address so I can get that letter sent out to you? Thank you so much for your time this evening and for your willingness to participate in this project. I am really looking forward to meeting you on _____. Have a nice evening!

Script to invite participants (from 3 names obtained from initial women who agreed to participate)

Hi! This is Amy Popillion. I am calling for _____.

Hi, _____. Do you have a minute? (If not, ask when would be a convenient time to call back). Great, the reason I am calling is to invite you to be a part of a research project I am doing related to women's experiences as mothers. The title of my project is "Mothering into the new millennium: How mothering affects women's lives." Your friend, _____, has agreed to be part of a 2-hour focus group discussion on a series of topics related to mothering. Because I wanted each mother in the group to have one other person there who she knows, I had asked _____ for a list of mothers she knew who might be willing to talk about their mothering experiences and your name was one she listed. Do you mind if I tell you just a bit about myself and my project?

I am a graduate student at Iowa State from the Human Development and Family Studies Department. I am currently working on my dissertation project. I am the mother of two sons, a 2-year-old who is my biological son and a 5-year-old foster son who my husband and I are adopting. Because I am a mother and aware of many of the different issues mothers face, I decided it would be interesting to choose motherhood as my research topic. What I plan to do for this research is to conduct focus groups which consist of groups of 6-8 mothers coming together to discuss a series of topics related to mothering. The focus groups will be videotaped for research purposes. The tapes will only be viewed by my major professor and myself. After the research is completed, all tapes will be destroyed. I will conduct focus groups and then do some individual interviews with some of the women from those groups. At this time what I would like to invite you to do is to participate in one of the focus groups. It would involve about a 2-hour time commitment on a Sunday or Tuesday afternoon or evening. Refreshments will be served at the group and I anticipate that it will be a fun time for you to get a chance to talk to other mothers. Participation is completely voluntary and all names and identifying information from the groups will be kept confidential. Does this sound like something you would be interested in doing with _____ or do you have any questions I could answer to help you decide?

If not interested – Okay. To help me out, may I ask why you are not interested at this time? Thanks for your time. Have a nice evening!

If yes – Great, I am really excited about this research and I think it will be a positive experience for the women who participate. Do you mind if I ask you just a few questions about yourself? How many children do you have? What are their ages and gender? Are you currently employed? [If yes] What type of work do you do and approximately how many hours a week do you work? Finally, what is your age?

Now, for some technical details – I have four different dates that I will be holding focus groups – Thursday, July 29 from 6:30-8:30; Sunday, August 01 from 3:00-5:00; Sunday, August 01 from 6:30-8:30; or Tuesday, July 29 from 6:30-8:30. _____ has chosen _____ as the date that works best for her. Will this work for you as well? [If no, I will see if one of the other dates works and contact the other woman to see if she would be able to switch to that date. If not I will consider having them in different groups or contacting one of the other 3 women first.] I will be sending a letter outlining the things we talked about today and I will plan to do reminder calls to everyone a few days before their group. If you have any questions for me before that time, please feel free to contact me at (515) 232-8318. Also because my project depends on having enough women participate in the groups, if you could call me as much in advance as possible should you not be able to attend I would

greatly appreciate it. Of course if something comes up last minute, just give me a call and let me know. You are always free to stop participation in the study.

Can I get your address so I can get that letter sent out to you? Thank you so much for your time this evening and for your willingness to participate in this project. I am really looking forward to meeting you on _____. Have a nice evening!

APPENDIX C

LETTER SENT TO FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

[Iowa State letterhead was used.]

[date]

Dear _____,

Thank you for agreeing to take part in a focus group discussion related to your experience as a mother. I am really excited about this research and believe it will be a positive experience for both of us. I would like to give you some background information on how this project was developed as well as information related to your focus group meeting.

My initial interest in exploring the topic of motherhood began as I myself grappled with the intense emotions of becoming a mother. I became interested in looking at how other mothers perceive what it means to be a mother and more specifically how mothering affects women's lives. Previous researchers have considered issues such as maternal identity formation, how becoming a parent influences other relationships in a woman's life, and how the relationship between mother/child influences the child. In my study, I am interested solely in the mothers' perspectives, thus gaining information directly from the source. This is why I have chosen to conduct focus groups and interviews with mothers from the community.

To begin my research, I will be conducting a series of focus group discussions with approximately eight women in each group. These groups will involve discussion on a series of topics related to mothering. You have chosen to be part of the **Tuesday evening group on August 03 from 6:30-8:30**. This group will meet at a designated room in the Child Development Building on the Iowa State campus (see enclosed map for directions and parking information). Light refreshments will be served. Feel free to dress how you feel most comfortable. As we discussed over the phone, participation is completely voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. There will be no right or wrong answers during the group discussion. All responses will be kept strictly confidential and your name will never appear on any written results. Pseudonyms will be used to ensure confidentiality. After all focus groups are completed, I will be selecting some women to take part in further interviews. Any further participation on your part will be completely voluntary and not contingent upon your participation in this focus group.

Again, thank you so much for your willingness to participate. If you have any questions regarding the study or your participation, please feel free to call me at (515) 232-8318. Please contact me if you are unable to attend, as it is important for me to have enough women for each discussion. I hope this will be a good experience for you and I look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Amy Popillion, MS
Graduate Student

Sedahlia Jasper Crase, Ph.D.
Major Professor

APPENDIX D

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT/ FOCUS GROUP PROCEDURES

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT AND FOCUS GROUP PROCEDURES

Please take a moment to read the following statements regarding the procedures for participation in this focus group. If you agree to the following requirements, please sign and date at the bottom. The purpose of this form is to ensure confidentiality, fairness, and respect for all participants of the group.

1. In consideration to all participants, all opinions and points of view will be respected.
2. Each participant will be given a chance to participate in the discussion.
3. Anything discussed during the focus group will be held within strict confidence and not shared outside the group.
4. If at any time, you wish to not share your point of view or if you wish to end your participation, you are free to do so.
5. The focus group discussion will be videotaped to allow the researcher to transcribe the information and use it for research purposes. The discussion will also be audio taped as a backup. To ensure confidentiality, names will not appear on any written materials. Pseudonyms will be used. After completion of the final research document, the tapes will be destroyed.

I have read and understand the above statements and agree to the above conditions.

Signature

Date

APPENDIX E
PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Please take a few minutes to respond to the following questions. This information will be used to help provide an overview of the general characteristics of the women taking part in this research. If you have a question about any of the items, please feel free to ask. Some of the questions cover general demographic characteristics, while some of the questions ask for your opinion or plans regarding general areas of mothering.

Your Name _____ Phone number _____

1. Please indicate the age and sex of each of your children. Indicate their relationship to you.

Age: _____ sex (M or F) _____ biological _____ adopted _____ other (explain) _____
 Age: _____ sex (M or F) _____ biological _____ adopted _____ other _____
 Age: _____ sex (M or F) _____ biological _____ adopted _____ other _____
 Age: _____ sex (M or F) _____ biological _____ adopted _____ other _____
 Age: _____ sex (M or F) _____ biological _____ adopted _____ other _____

2. What is your age? _____

3. What is your racial/ethnic background? _____

4. Is there an adult male (males) living with you? _____ yes _____ no
 If yes, what is his (their) relationship to you (e.g., husband, boyfriend, father)?

5. If you are married, how many years have you been married to your current husband?

Is this your first husband? _____ yes _____ no

What is your spouse's age, occupation, and highest level of education?

Age _____ Occupation _____

Level of education _____

6. How would you describe your family in terms of social class (e.g., lower, middle, upper-middle, upper, etc.)? _____

7. Were you raised in a particular religion? _____ yes _____ no

If yes, what was your religious affiliation? _____

8. Do you currently participate in a religious or spiritual organization? _____ yes _____ no

If yes, what is your religious or spiritual organization? _____

9. If your first child is biological, was your pregnancy with that child planned?

_____ yes _____ no

If yes, what were your reasons for wanting a child?

10. Would you like to have more children? _____ yes _____ no

If yes, how many? _____

11. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

☐ GED (high school equivalency)
☐ High school
☐ 2 year or technical degree
☐ Some college at a 4-year institution
☐ Bachelor's degree
☐ Master's degree
☐ Doctoral degree

If you have completed education beyond high school, what was your degree-related field or major? _____

12. Are you currently employed? ☐ yes ☐ no

If yes, list the type of employment as well as the average number of hours per week you work.

Type of employment _____ # of hours _____

13. Briefly describe your work history (if applicable) since the birth of your first child to the present time (e.g., type of work, number of hours/wk, length of time at each job, length of maternity leave):

[more space was given]

14. If you could arrange your time just the way you wanted, which would you prefer to be doing?

Working full-time _____ Working part-time _____ Staying home exclusively _____

15. In your opinion, what best describes mothering?

☐ A natural, instinctual, commonsense-based task
☐ Something that needs to be learned
☐ A combination of both

Please elaborate on your response (use the back if needed):

[more space was given]

16. Describe how (if at all) you believe being a mother differs from being a father (use back if needed):

[more space was given]

APPENDIX F
FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The discussion will be started by asking each person to tell her name, how many children she has, their ages and gender, and any additional information she wants to share.
2. Offer your insights on what the experience of motherhood is like for you – What is it like to be a mom?
3. What messages, if any, do you receive about how to mother your children? These messages may be in the form of expectations, advice, or in other forms. They may be from your families, friends, the media, or just society in general.
4. Describe how, if at all, being a mother influences your relationships with others (i.e. with your spouse, your own mother, friends, etc.).
5. Describe how, if at all, being a mother has influenced the choices you have made related to having or not having a career?
6. We are probably all aware of the 1950s “Leave it to beaver” mother stereotypes moving then to the 1980s Supermom stereotypes – describe what stereotypes you perceive from the 1990s. How will future generations describe the stereotypical ‘90s mother?
7. How do you feel those stereotypes impact your experience as a mother?
8. Do you believe there are some common experiences of mothering among women regardless of background, working status, family status, number of children, and the array of other differences among mothers? Are there some common experiences of mothering and if so describe them? If you don’t think there are, talk about why you believe that.
9. Is there something important about being a mother that you haven’t had a chance to share?

APPENDIX G

LETTER SENT TO INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

[Iowa State letterhead was used]

[date]

Dear [name],

Thank you for agreeing to further participation in my research project, "Mothering into the new millennium." Initial results from the focus groups were fascinating showing patterns of many significant issues in mothers' lives. I am looking forward to exploring some of those issues more in-depth with you.

You have chosen [date] as a convenient day for your interview. I will plan to meet you at [time] in [designated meeting place]. You can expect our interview to last approximately two hours. Please feel free to dress how you feel most comfortable and to bring a soda or snack along. As in the focus groups, participation is completely voluntary and you may end your participation at any time. There will be no right or wrong answers and all responses will be kept confidential. In any writings or presentations done from this research, pseudonyms will be used to ensure confidentiality.

Again, thank you so much for your willingness to participate. If you have any questions regarding your interview, please feel free to call me at (515) 232-8318.

Sincerely,

Amy Popillion, M.S.
Graduate Student

Sedahlia Jasper Crase, Ph.D.
Major Professor

APPENDIX H
INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

To begin individual interviews, I first welcomed the participant and thanked her for her willingness to participate. I briefly explained the process of moving from focus groups to individual interviews and very briefly gave a summary of what themes emerged from the focus groups.

1. Individuals were asked to respond to the following statement for each of the related themes:
Please talk about your experience of mothering related to:

- (a) Sacrifice

What are some of the sacrifices you make as a mother? Give examples.

How do you feel about that?

How do you define sacrifice?

- (b) Emotional exhaustion "It's more emotionally exhausting than I thought it would be."

What are your experiences of emotional exhaustion as a mother?

Talk about a time that makes you feel especially emotionally exhausted.

In what ways do you deal with the emotional exhaustion?

- (c) Pressure/expectations

What type of pressure do you receive? From whom?

What expectations do you feel? From whom?

- (d) Connection to your child

In spite of the fact that many mothers mentioned sacrifice, emotional exhaustion, as well as many pressures and expectations, several mothers mentioned an intense connection they have with their children. Talk about your experience in this area.

- (e) Perceived lack of value for mothering

While we just talked about how you feel about mothering, a common theme throughout the focus groups seemed to be a perceived lack of value on the role of mothering at the societal level. How do you feel about that? Do you agree or disagree and why?

2. One of the goals of this project is to be able to use this information to help other mothers and to help other professionals better understand mothers. After participating in your focus group and this individual interview, how do you feel this information will be beneficial to others?

[The following questions were deleted after the first two interviews.]

3. Thinking of the themes and what we talked about today, what advice would you offer to someone considering motherhood?
4. Retrospectively, what would have helped ease your transition to motherhood?
5. Even now, what do you need to feel supported in your role as a mother?

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